

## Worn Shoes: Identity, Memory and Footwear

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### Abstract

This article raises questions about the role of footwear within contemporary processes of identity formation and presents ongoing research into perceptions, experiences and memories of shoes among men and women in the North of England. In a series of linked theoretical discussions it argues that a focus on women, fashion and shoe consumption as a feature of a modern, western 'project of the self' obscures a more revealing line of inquiry where footwear can be used to explore the way men and women live out their identities as fluid, embodied processes. In a bid to deepen theoretical understanding of such processes, it takes account of historical and contemporary representations of shoes as a symbolically efficacious vehicle for personal transformation, asking how the idea and experience of transformation informs everyday and life course experiences of transition, as individuals put on and take off particular pairs of shoes. In so doing, the article addresses the methodological and analytic challenges of accessing experience that is both fluid and embodied.

**Keywords:** Footwear, Shoes, Identity, Memory, Embodiment

### A Glass Slipper Syndrome?

**1.1** Referring to the pervasive representation of fashionable footwear on contemporary calendars and greetings cards, and in museums collections and exhibitions, Benstock and Ferriss ask 'what is it in our culture that has led to this fascination with shoes?' (2001: 2). Their question extends beyond a world of mediated ephemera, to include the design, consumption and wearing of shoes. In a context where women are often assumed to dominate the market, shoe designer, Brian Atwood, claims that: 'the relationship between women and shoes is magical: they can completely change the way a woman feels' (Buys 2006: 100). Shoemaker Natacha Morro echoes this point: 'Shoes turn you into someone else' (Newman 2006: 83), while Pond claims that shoes have 'the magic power to make you into someone else, someone without skin problems, someone without thin hair, someone without a horsy laugh. And they do' (Pond 1985, cited in Belk 2003: 1).

**1.2** Shoes are thus being ascribed the capacity to transcend the functional and even the fashionable – to have implications for identity itself. Through the skills of designers and advertisers, they are seen to achieve symbolic efficacy and transformative, even magical powers. Viewed from this perspective, shoes might seem to be having a 'moment', one that is commonly associated with women. Yet within European popular culture a long tradition of story-telling has foregrounded the potency of footwear in relation to both male *and* female characters. Examples include the seven league boots that aggrandise Puss-in-Boots; Cinderella's glass slippers; the elf-stitched shoes that transform the cobbler's fortunes; the red shoes that promise to dance Hans Christian Andersen's Karen out of poverty; the worn-out shoes of The Twelve Dancing Princesses which lead their suitors to either death or a throne; the shoemaker Leprechauns who conceal pots of gold; the red-hot shoes that kill Snow White's stepmother. In twentieth century popular culture, Dorothy's ruby slippers transport her home in *The Wizard of Oz*, in UK boys' comics, Billy Dane scores in his magic football boots, and more recently, in the film *Like Mike* (2002), a 14-year-old orphan becomes a National Basketball Association superstar after trying on a pair of sneakers with the faded initials MJ inside, a theme that draws on the magic basketball boots seen in the video *Slam Dunk Ernest* (1995). Examples from the last 50 years of pop music also show footwear marking a transition or assuming a pivotal role within a relationship: the Everley Brothers' 'Put my little shoes away'; Carl Perkins' 'Blue Suede Shoes'; Nancy Sinatra's 'These boots are made for walking'; Depeche Mode's 'Walking in My Shoes'; Kate Bush's 'The Red Shoes'; and Paolo Nutini's 'New Shoes'.

**1.3** While the focus of these representations of shoes is not limited to adult women, they do suggest a continuity with contemporary female-oriented images that promise radical identity transformations. Indeed, what a cultural and historical perspective reveals is a breadth of transformative potential being ascribed to footwear, a capacity to overcome inequalities, whether based on class, gender, age or, for Puss-in-Boots, species; to come up with magical remedies for social problems. Like Belk (2003), we ask whether such promises of transformation have an emotional or experiential counterpart in the lives of both men and women who go about their world in such products. Certainly, from the studies Belk undertook in Salt Lake City, Utah in 1990 and 2000, he was persuaded that 'to most Americans, their footwear is an extension and expression of themselves' (2003: 1). Indeed he tentatively suggests that for Americans 'even when they are flippant and frivolous, shoes are serious objects of hope, joy and sorrow' (2003: 12). With regard to identity, a more recent psychological study by Gillath et al. (2002) showed that shoes could provide reliable first impression information about the gender, age, income and level of attachment anxiety of their wearers. We are asking similar questions among women and men living in the North of England. Ours is an ongoing three-year project<sup>[1]</sup> which uses footwear as a lens through which to develop

understandings of embodied identity. Using the methods set out below, we are exploring the scope of shoes to foster individuals' aspirations and indeed to enable the configuring and re-configuring of distinctions such as those based on age, gender, ethnicity and social class.

**1.4** What we know is that the consumption of shoes in the UK has undergone radical change during the last decade. A 2006 survey of attitudes and practices around shoes by the magazine *Harper's Bazaar* revealed among its findings that 25% of British women would buy shoes before paying bills. Indeed, following the popularity of *Sex and the City*, with its depiction of avid shoe consumption, footwear has acquired a role as a valid topic of conversation. In 2007, consumer research group, Mintel, reported that in the UK 'shoes have moved centre-stage in fashion and have grown much faster than clothing in the last five years'; they are 'no longer seen as a clothing essential to be bought on a replacement basis only' (*Mintel Reports*, August 2007). Four years later, in September 2011, Mintel estimated that 'the footwear market was worth £4.3 billion in 2010, an expansion of 30% over the last decade. Last year witnessed an impressive performance from the footwear sector, with annual growth of over 8%. Fashion played a major role in driving expenditure ...' (<http://www.mintel.com/press-centre/press-releases/746/mintels-british-lifestyles-report-reveals-consumer-reaction-to-the-age-of-austerity>).

## A New Project of the Self?

**2.1** When media accounts are coupled with marketing statistics, there seems to be evidence for a contemporary *shift* in how shoes are perceived and experienced. 'Shoes are hot', asserted Benstock and Ferriss in 2001 (2001:1) and certainly we need to recognise their historically-specific and therefore variable social and cultural dimensions. Rather than being functionally essential to bipedalism (Ingold 2004), shoes and shoe-wearing are markers of distinction which can contribute to the cultural assemblage we know as clothing, dress or fashion in a whole variety of ways. As a resource for identity formation, materials such as these, that enclose and display the body, have received considerable academic attention (Wilson 1985; Crane 2000; Entwistle 2000 a, b; Entwistle and Wilson 2001; Guy et al. 2001; Weber and Mitchell 2004; Styles 2008). Moreover, literature on identity and dress tends to reflect a contemporary notion of identity as a *process* of being or becoming, rather than a thing; an approach best expressed in the term *identification* (Jenkins 2004: 5).

**2.2** If we want to understand why an item such as shoes does currently seem to be 'hot' (Benstock and Ferriss 2001), accounts of the changing historical relationship between fashion and identification can be helpful (for example, Entwistle 2000a). Yet as researchers we are cautious about the use of sociological theories that describe reflexive self actualisation, the embodied project of the self, as a particular feature of *modern western* society (Giddens 1991; Featherstone 1991; Shilling 1993, 2005; Turner 1996; Evans and Lee 2002). Entwistle (2000a), for example, argues that stable class and gender differences that were made evident in 19th century dress yielded to more fluid, pick-and-mix clothing practices within fragmented, 20th century social environments. Her case both reflects and reinforces sociological arguments for a specifically modern 'project of the self'. However, the notion that modernity offers scope for personal empowerment through choice has been criticised for overlooking the regulatory dimensions of 'choice' (McRobbie 2007). In addition, Giddens' (1991) framing of *modernist* agency or reflexive self actualisation downplays ethnographic and historical evidence of its much greater pervasiveness, for example, in religions of personal redemption. Jenkins argues that 'there is nothing to gain from annexing notions such as selfhood, identity and reflexivity as definitively modern – didn't people know who they were, or think about it, before the twentieth century?' (2004: 12-13). With reference to anthropological work in traditional societies, Cohen (1994: 21-22) and Hockey and James (2003: 18-19) similarly suggest that reflexive self actualisation contributes to identification in a far broader range of contexts and eras than high modernity.

**2.3** These debates ground the project we describe in this article. Shoes can indeed be seen as integral to a distinctively modern, rapid-turnover world of consumption and disposal where mediated celebrity culture fuels obsessive reflexivity. Yet they also reach into mundane environments of everyday functioning, specialist spheres such as rock climbing (Robinson 2008), and memorable life-course transitions such as graduations, weddings and funerals. The pervasiveness of the red stiletto in popular imagery can reduce shoes to normative femininity's signature accessory and in so doing obscures a wealth of important sociological questions about footwear's contribution to broader experiences of gender, social class, ageing, health and the everyday. As objects worn on the body as it moves within social environments, shoes potentially materialise abstract notions of power and agency in their fabric. For example, Catherine, a participant in our project, said of her favourite shoes: 'they're an important looking shoe, they mean business and with the right outfit I would mean business in these'. As we argue below, however, the appearance of agency she feels these shoes would bestow on her is constrained by the materiality of her foot problems. How footwear operates within the mundane 'transformations' of everyday life that nonetheless constitute identity is thus a key question.

**2.4** Certainly shoes are evident within the life course transitions that women and men of all ages are likely to undergo. For example, 'growing up' into adulthood in an individualistic western society such as the UK (Hockey and James 1993), can involve the symbolic marking of independent locomotion in the purchase, retention and even bronzing of 'baby's first shoes' (Ingold 2004), a transition now segmented by shoe companies that produce 'crawling', 'cruising' and 'walking' shoes for babies (see for example, <http://asp-gb.secure-zone.net/v2/indexPop.jsp?id=904/1132/4884&lng=en>); at marriage the bride's white satin slippers help shift her identity, a symbolism extended in the wedding-card bridal shoe and top hat that stand, metonymically, for bride and groom, the tying of shoes to the going-away car, and the traditional proscription against going shoeless in the bridal chamber; making the transition to adulthood can require young people to choose 'interview shoes' that indicate conformity, seriousness and ambition; and the shape of a foot imprinted on a shoe may be an unbearable evocation of loss, whether in an Auschwitz memorial or a couple's once shared wardrobe.

**2.5** Like the shoes that survive us, the clothing of the dead exemplifies potent elements within the material culture that surrounds us; it can 'hint at something only half understood, sinister, threatening, the atrophy of the body, and the evanescence of life' (Wilson 1985: 1). This persuasive realisation of that which lies beyond the rational mind can intensify when the marks of the body are visible, as in the case of shoes (Entwistle 2000b). Thus, while shoes are represented as today's 'hot', transformatory objects of desire (Benstock and Ferriss 2001:1), popularly seen as a 'fashion issue' that excites women and baffles men, their contribution to life course transitions in the UK suggests a broader and more enduring sphere of symbolic efficacy that transcends gender distinctions. With the capacity to change embodied experiences of time, place and identity, shoes appear within transitions between: life course categories (baby to toddler, single to married, student to employee); activities (work to leisure); health and illness (orthopaedic shoes); gendered identities (from man to woman); social classes (from white stiletto to Sloane loafer<sup>[2]</sup>); everyday and specialist competencies (mother to runner); lay and professional identities (the funeral director's shiny black shoes); the mundane and the magical (schoolchild to skateboarder or disco diva).

**2.6** Using the research methods outlined below, we are therefore engaging critically with arguments made for a distinctively postmodern project of the self, one resourced by relatively wealthy, aspirational westerners. What our programme of work allows us to explore is the contribution of footwear to men and women's everyday and life course transitions. With a notion of identity as multiple and fluid (Jenkins 2004), we are examining the capacity of both mundane and extraordinary transitions to promise or indeed enable transformation. Querying a narrow focus on the role of self reinvention within high modernity (Giddens 1991), we engage with its potentially obscured contribution to the breadth of everyday processes of identification

## The Study

**3.1** Discussing clothing, Tseelon argues that '[w]hat is missing from the plethora of semiotic and sociological analyses of fashion styles and trends, historical accounts or psychological experiments is the reasoning given by wearers themselves' (cited in Banim et al. 2001: 4). Entwistle (2000a) echoes her concern, differentiating 'fashion', as an abstract system, from 'dress', as embodied experience. These methodological critiques informed our original study design. Moreover, since identity is co-constituted by individuals and those who surround them, in what Jenkins (2004) calls the external-internal dialectic of identification, wearers' 'reasoning' is just one element within such processes. As Banim et al. argue with respect to clothing: '[u]ntil we actually take our clothed bodies into the public realm, into the physical and social space we chose the outfit for, we are guessing' (2001: 1). Our project therefore investigates the emotional and social dimensions of shopping, storing, wearing, maintaining and disposing of shoes, using symbolic interactionist and phenomenological approaches (Blumer 1969; Moran 2000) that prioritise lived experience. Since shoes, quite literally, move us between social spaces, we designed our project to make everyday processes of engendering identities visible.

**3.2** Empirical work includes focus groups and case studies, both of which have been undertaken by Rachel Dille, the project's Research Associate. Focus groups have been carried out with 12 different categories of people, spanning age, ethnicity, health and gender-based distinctions and including parents buying shoes for children, bereaved people in possession of footwear belonging to a dead relative or friend, people who wear specialist footwear for sport, and male and female self-avowed 'shoe lovers'. To elicit accounts of the shared cultural imaginary which both surrounds and arises out of everyday experiences of shoes, open-ended discussion was facilitated, with an emphasis on the connections, ideas, emotions and experiences that participants associated with footwear.

**3.3** From these focus groups, 15 people have been recruited for year-long case studies of their 'shoe lives', our sample being designed to reflect the diversity of the focus group categories. Case study work is ongoing at the time of writing and includes: three interviews, the first of which is a filmed 'tour' of participants' shoes and how they are stored in the home; an inventory of the shoes someone owns; a daily log that records which shoes they choose to wear, and when and why they change them across a three-week period; a scrapbook in which participants represent any thoughts or experiences associated with shoes in a medium of their choice; a shopping trip accompanied by Rachel; and a filmed activity which provides a visual record of one pair of the participant's shoes in motion, for use during a video review interview where participants are prompted to reflect on the taken-for-granted and everyday nature of footwear and movement. Climbing, Zumba dancing, DJ-ing and horse riding are among the activities recorded so far. Data presented below, using pseudonyms to protect anonymity, demonstrate the efficacy of these methods. We begin, here, with a clip that shows Rob Fisher, a 63 year-old participant, in the boots he wears when saddling his horse and when riding: <<http://youtu.be/hfaBV46tx0Q>>.

## Making Sense of Data

**4.1** The data we are collecting does indeed describe the presence of shoes within the transitions that many people undergo – and here we present examples relating to specific life-course transitions: from childhood to adolescence, entrance to university, graduation, marriage and baptism. We begin with a female member of the parents' focus group who described how the shift from being a child to a teenager was partly made and marked by moving into shoes with an elevated heel:

My oldest is at that, eleven, sort of in between age growing up and she's desperate to wear heels, in fact when she was on holiday with her grandma, you know, she talked her grandma into buying her a pair for a wedding. ... Wedges that were about that high, so they weren't, but I said, she came home in them and I said you're not wearing them. So, but I let her wear them on holiday this year, you know, abroad. [laughs] I said that's it, you can wear them on holiday and then we're, they're going in the bin when we get home. Yeah, because she couldn't walk in them.

**4.2** Older female focus group participants (aged between 68 and 90) recalled parents similarly seeking to calibrate their point of entry into adolescence with shoes as a key marker of transition:

When you got in your teens and you could wear court shoes. [laughs] ... They were brilliant, very ... You were allowed to wear a court shoe. ... I remember getting a good hiding for buying some shoes with heels on. [laughs]

**4.3** One older female participant said that she was 17 and in employment before she was able to buy court shoes, but even then parental sanctions were imposed, making her transition to adulthood the outcome of a cross-generational struggle that is similar to the one described above by the contemporary parent:

Seventeen. ... Couldn't afford them before that. I had to save up for ages to buy them and they weren't very much, I think they were about six and eleven. [laughs] Six and eleven pence. ... I couldn't wear them, my dad wouldn't let me. [laughs] ... because they, they thought it was being fast, [laughs] you were being. ... being flash.

**4.4** A female focus group participant, in her teens, aspired to the expensive, red-soled shoes made by celebrity designer, Christian Louboutin. Gaining entry to university provided a bargaining point in her attempts to get her mother to buy her a pair:

I've signed a pact with her, if I go to university that it's my first choice, she said if I go to like the university that I've got the offer from she'll buy me a pair of Louboutins, which I've like wanted for ages and I have been saving up but she's going to get me them, so. [laughs] Because I'd idolised the red sole. [laughs]

**4.5** Graduation was also associated with footwear for Mark Towler, a 23 year-old focus group participant; in this case, a particular pair became highly visible to him because of their lack of fit with the occasion.

He said:

I went to my brother's graduation a few years ago ... it was all, yeah ... nice suit and, you know, nice shoes, polished, everything, you know, and yeah I think it's an occasion ... you should get dressed up and, you know, try and look good but yeah, I remember ... there was a young, there was a guy who I noticed, so I figured probably similar age to me, he had a suit on, tie and everything but he had a pair of Converse on, I remember ... thinking ... I can't believe you've done that ... he was so inappropriate ... for that occasion ... you should just let up on your sort of fashion.

**4.6** Moving into adulthood, Helen Thomas, a 44-year old case study participant, showed Rachel her shoes and explained her fondness for particular pairs in terms of their connection with marriage and baptism, life course transitions for which they were bought or for which she felt they would be suitable:

These are Camper shoes and I've had these for nine years ... my husband bought them for me when we got married, there was a shoe factory that sold Camper shoes, which we visited more than we intended to because it was a rainy holiday in Majorca so, but one day he'd gone on his own and bought these for me, so I like them because they remind me of my wedding.

**4.7** She went on to show another pair and said:

I bought these for my son's christening and I really like them, I like that they're a wedge, I like the flowers on the front, they're a little bit kind of pulled and frayed and the suede doesn't look as nice as it did when they were new but I like them, they're, as far as high heels go, they're quite comfortable, I like the way they look, I like the kind of 1940s feel about them, so when I have had an occasion to go to weddings, for weddings, that sort of thing I've, I've worn these quite a bit and I suppose they've got a bit of a sentimental feel having had them for Sam's christening as well.



**Figure 1.** Helen's Christening Shoes

**4.8** These data indeed suggest that for some people shoes have an importance that transcends their functionality. But to note the associations individuals make between a particular pair and a graduation, wedding or baptism does not *explain* how shoes might help engender transition and indeed transformation. What people say does not provide an adequate theoretical account of how change actually occurs, even if it is an important starting point. However, Jenkins' (2004) notion of an internal-external dialectic of identification, that is, 'identity as a synthesis of (internal) self-definition and (external) definitions of oneself offered by others' (2004: 18) can help here. It is echoed in Banim et al.'s reference to issues that women may consider when choosing their clothes for the day: 'We think about whom we will be seeing and thus who will be seeing us' (2001: 2).

**4.9** Earlier theories of identity and change tended to privilege society's structures and say little about the *experience* of undergoing transition (see Hockey and James' (2003: 22-38) critique of Van Gennep's (1908 [1960]) rites of passage schema). What has now been brought to this area, however, are insights from the sociology of the body. Stressing that 'selfhood does not stop at the skin', Jenkins still insists that 'it always begins – literally or figuratively – from the body. There is nowhere else to begin' (2004: 46). However, if the body is key to identification, then its transformations are integral to its status as a social phenomenon, for as Shilling argues, 'the body is most profitably conceptualised as an unfinished biological and social phenomenon which is transformed, within certain limits, by virtue of its entry into, and participation in, society' (1993: 12). Adding items of material culture to the body – clothing and shoes



– therefore potentially engenders social transformation.

**4.10** But how does this actually figure within identification? Here the distinction between the body we *are* and the body we *have*, the 'animated living experiential body' and the 'objective, exterior and institutionalised body' (Turner 1992: 41) is useful. Sitting at the boundary of the objective body-we-have, clothing locates the lived body within the social environments of identification, simultaneously 'shield and sword' (Wilson 1985: 8). Drawing on the cultural phenomenology of Csordas (1994, 2002) and Merleau Ponty (1962, 1974), then, we understand shoes as integral to bodily engagement with the world, an engagement that Csordas describes as the existential ground of culture and self. Theories of haptic perception have privileged manual touch as a mode of encountering one's environment; but 'pedestrian touch', or walking, can play an equal, if not more important role in orienting individuals within their social and material environments (Ingold 2004: 330). Warnier (2001), for example, argues that it is in movement – or through motricity – that embodied subjectivities come into being and, as our data show, this kind of engagement can include wheelchair-assisted mobility.

**4.11** These perspectives inform our emergent analysis of the data we are gathering. If selfhood begins from the body, a concern with the internal-external dialectic of identification means attending to embodied experience within social environments; hence our focus on 'people-with-shoes'. In her related work on clothing, Candy (2010), for example, critiques a purely externalised, semiotic approach to identity as something 'read off' the body's outer surface. Here, in a detailed recollection of the garments she wore when undergoing her annual childhood rite of passage 'back to school', she articulates her transition between summer holiday freedom and the institutionalised autumn school term:

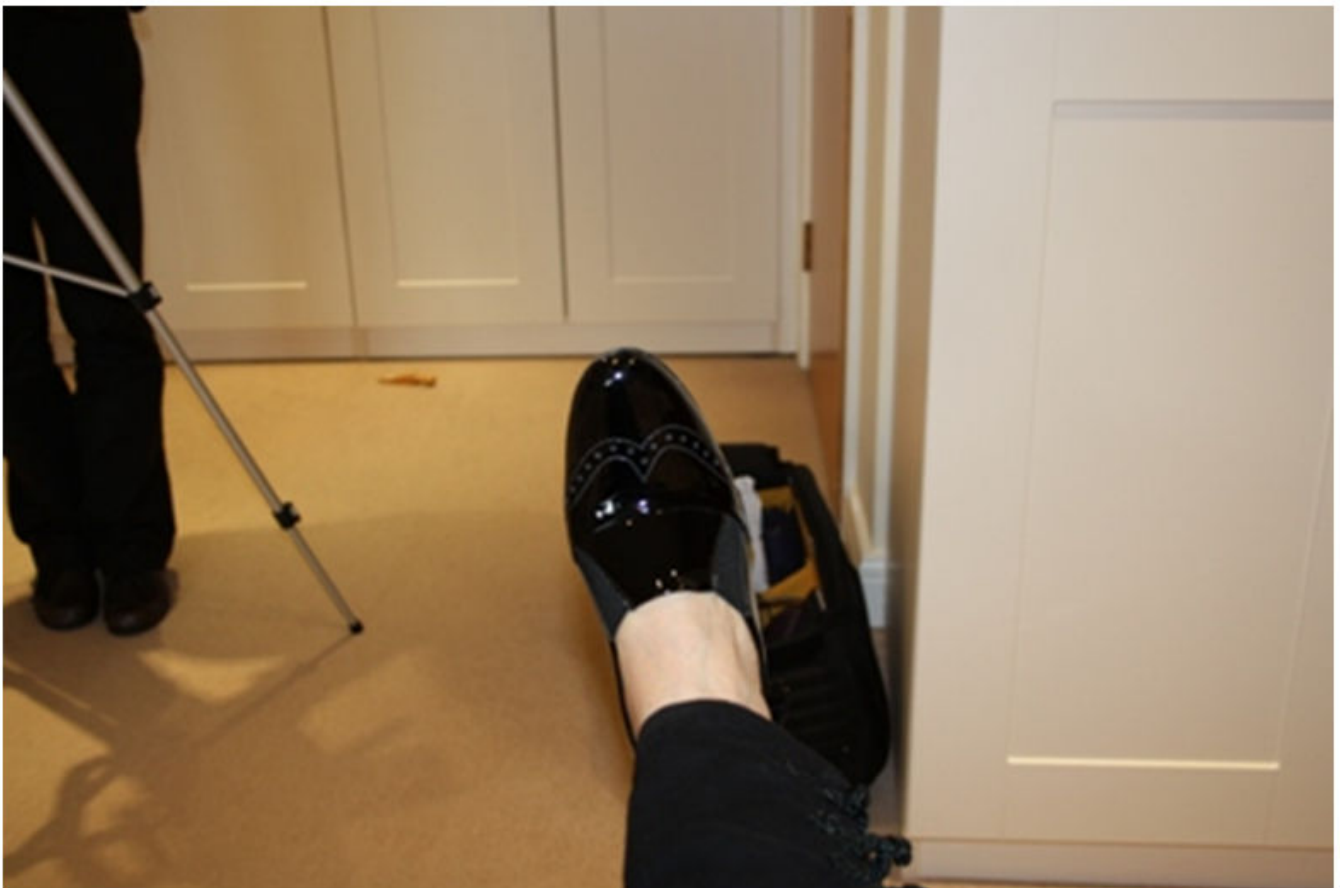
I have intense childhood memories of the feelings of dressing in my winter school uniform on the first day back after the long summer holidays. Putting the uniform on symbolised school for me, but also made me feel that I was becoming the person who was going back to study and commune again with my peers. Even more than that, I remember that I felt I was somehow transforming with the seasons, becoming primed for winter. The weights, textures, colours and shapes of each garment of my school uniform combined to affect an anticipatory, wintry emotion made up of everything that this forthcoming time might entail for me. Even the ephemeral, sparkly frisson of Christmas would be evoked (Candy 2010: 4.6).

**4.12** While all clothing evidences this curious entanglement of the biological and the social, we argue that shoes stand in a particularly intimate relationship with the body, assuming the foot's shape and so marking the wearer's embodied individuality. While shoes can damage the feet, for example, when high heels are worn continuously, they also enable culturally-specific competencies, such as classical ballet and climbing. Indeed, shoes can 'produce' or 'finish' the body, profoundly altering posture and gait depending on whether they are high heels, walking boots or flip-flops. Such processes are often historically-specific, as in the contemporary example of extreme heels for which the would-be wearer may need training before they are able to walk successfully: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRb5TilVeel&feature=related>>. As such, shoes occupy the boundaries between self, other and environment; externally perceptible; integral to individuals' motricity; and intimately connected with the sensory, anatomo-physiological body. Capable of transforming and being transformed by what they are worn with, shoes have relational potential within dynamic social processes (Banim et al. 2001: 5).

**4.13** This perspective is evidenced by Catherine, a 60 year-old case study participant, and we quote from her at some length to show precisely how she articulates the entanglement of the biological and the social. Not only does the materiality of her body, the size, shape and health of her feet, represent an intractable dimension of the shoes she chooses and wears, but also the social contexts within which she anticipates wearing the shoes and the functions they – and Catherine herself – will be performing. How she manages her feet-in-shoes is thus shaped by many concerns: she can make sure that she gets an appropriate 'fit' by taking the advice of her podiatrist, chiropodist and pedicurist, or she can prioritise the appearance of the shoe, its 'fit' with the context of wear, and for her this is likely to involve foot pain or discomfort.

**4.14** Catherine has arthritis and bunions and has received treatment from a range of medical and therapeutic service providers. When bringing out her shoes, and photographing them during her first interview, she held up a pair that she described as follows:

Here we have my all time, I think ... at present, my favourite shoes, I've had them ... three or four years and I've worn, [laughs] I've worn them not more than once or twice, the heels are unmarked, the soles are unmarked, the uppers are pristine, there's not a scrap of dust or mud or scratch on them, they are pristine ... they don't walk, these shoes do not walk, they were not made for walking. I love them, I want to be able to wear them, they look so good when they're on. ... Because they're high and they're sexy. ... And they're slender and they're not made for people who are unable to walk, [laughs] they're made for people who are looking, you know, they're an important looking shoe, they mean business and with the right outfit I would mean business in these ... they're a serious shoe and I love the height it gives me and I love the body sway you get with a heel and you begin, you feel sexy and I think you don't want to lose that, it's something that you want to hang on to as you get older and there's too many things getting in the way of being sexy and if your feet hurt and you can't walk in high heels, you know, this is it really, you're on the road to ruin,



**Figure 2.** Catherine's Favourite Shoes

**4.15** Her account provides powerful evidence of her embodied experience of this pair of shoes, along with her understanding of how they might, quite literally, position her in terms of age, gender and (hetero)sexuality, their potential capacity to 'finish' her body in a way that she desires. In addition, Catherine did not simply present an internal, self-defined sense of herself in her interview, but referred to the social contexts within which she wished to 'fit' and the importance of footwear to that accommodation:

These were bought as a summer sandal many years ago ... they're mock croc, they've got a little kitten heel, little mule and I wore them at dinners for, more formal dinners, we have to

go to a lot of charity, charity bashes ... so we have to go ... every year and it's always quite a posh do and most people would buy a new pair of shoes each time they went but because I'm always wearing a long dress I don't buy any more shoes because these do the trick, these give me a certain amount of body sway because they've a thin heel, they are reasonably comfortable so I can keep them on all evening and what I did last year, because they, because they flopped off the back of my heels a bit too much going up and down the grand staircase, last year I put some ribbon, some black ribbon round the, underneath the instep and tied them from underneath the instep, across there and round my ankle and finished it with a huge black bow, which was fabulous.



**Figure 3.** Catherine's Little Mules

**4.16** Here, in a final extract from Catherine's interview, she talks about another aspect of the embodied experience of shoes, one which a number of participants have cited.

Right, these are my idea of heaven, I adore these sandals ... I want to trip the light fantastic in these, I want to walk with a brisk clip clop, clip clop, clip clop in these, but ... when I actually walk I go slither, slither, slide in these because they're quite slippery, they fall off the back of my foot, [laughs] ... under my toes hurts and across the top of my foot hurts when I'm wearing them ... I was just disappointed all I did was make this horrible slapping noise.





**Figure 4.** Catherine's Sandals

**4.17** When questioned about the attraction of this sound, Catherine said:

When I was a child, it was all I ever wanted to be was a teenager, grown up and wearing the sort of things that I admired that the ... grown up girls wore and it was pointed toe, kitten heels ... it was a sign you were grown up if you were allowed to have some and my mother would never allow me to have them, so I never felt grown up enough and I never felt sophisticated because of my foot problems even then as a child ... my mother always made me wear sensible shoes, so it was a girl who was a year older than me and frowned on by my mother as being fast, so this fast girl turned up at the age of fourteen in kitten-



heeled shoes like these, with a sling back and pointed toes and lots of little straps and she made this clip clop, clip clop noise which was so seductive, I so wanted to make that noise.

**4.18** Again, then, it is a question not just of the fit of the shoe but its fittedness for a particular gendered life course transition that Catherine desired. Moreover, through the case study work we undertook it becomes apparent that the ways in which an external-internal dialectic of identification operated during Catherine's early life, between her mother, herself and the 'grown up girls', mesh with more recent experiences of 'formal dinners' and 'posh dos' where the initial seduction of clip-clopping kitten heels remains as a pivotal sensory experience.

### Body, Agency and Memory

**5.1** The data presented from Catherine's interview therefore demonstrate the intersection of the social and material environment, the body's intractability and its agency in shaping her experience of, and participation in the social world. And the same data reveal the potency of shoes themselves, their capacity to restrict or enable, to evoke the possibility of a particular kind of embodied femininity for Catherine. Footwear thus belongs to a world of objects that is anything but 'still life'. Rather, as Pels et al. argue, objects possess 'constitutive agentic effects within the entangled networks of sociality/ materiality' (1998: 2). As we have shown, the agency of shoes is evidenced in the ways in which they can condition everyday embodied subjectivity.

**5.2** However, if identification is understood as an incomplete process, its changing *temporal* trajectory (Hockey and James 2003: 199-214) also requires consideration. Knowing who we are partly derives from knowing who we have been. Memory is thus crucial to reflexivity and the 'reforging' of the self (Jenkins 2004: 12), the production of identity (Lawler 2008: 11). As Antze and Lambek argue 'memory serves as both a phenomenological ground of identity ... and the means for explicit identity construction' (1996: xvi).

**5.3** One dimension of our focus on lived experience, then, is the role of shoes as an item of material culture within the formation of memory, a link with earlier experience that cannot be bracketed off from current subjectivity (Hallam and Hockey 2001). Indeed, as Lawler argues, such materials resource *active* processes of identification, one of which is the narrating of a life story: 'By considering identity in terms of narrative, it is possible to see past and present linked in a spiral of interpretation and reinterpretation' (2008: 19). Thus, as data below indicate, shoes can mediate between past transitions and contemporary identities, embodying events and eras in their fabric and design, in their marks of wear. While the shoes of the dead can quite literally 'stand in', metonymically, for the person, the shoes of the living also have scope as biographical objects. As Hoskins argues, 'ordinary household possessions ... might be given an extraordinary significance by becoming entangled in the events of a person's life and used as a vehicle for selfhood' (1998: 2). Thus, the biographical object 'grows old, and may become worn and tattered along the life span of its owner ... [i]t anchors the owner to a particular time and place' (Hoskins 1998: 8). For these reasons, then, our concern with everyday processes of identification also requires us to consider footwear's capacity to act as an autobiographical device.

**5.4** This means treating the consumption of shoes as a social process that goes beyond isolated purchases into cycles of use and re-use as goods are transformed through incorporation into everyday life (Miller et al. 1998: 8). Banim and Guy (2001) suggest that clothing is consumed repeatedly, moving from 'best' to 'work' to 'scruff'. In work on second-hand cultures, Gregson and Crewe (2003) similarly suggest that prioritising single acts of purchase masks cycles of use and re-use which, in cases such as shoes, may involve divestment rituals designed to overcome traces of previous ownership. Alongside the symbolic efficacy of shoes within everyday transitions, then, we are exploring their capacity to bind the styles of particular historical moments with individual biographies. In this way we give them historical-biographical consideration (Hockey and James 2003), asking how large-scale social changes are implicated in the transitions that constitute the life course.

**5.5** We conclude this article with two examples that demonstrate this capacity of shoes to act as memory objects, mementoes of previous identities, particularly at times of transition. As the first one shows, their potency in evoking particular experiences can render them unwearable if the memories they resource are painful. Luna, a 29 year old case study participant, grew up in Australia but had also lived in China, Malaysia and, now, in the UK. Whilst participating in the project she was preparing for another geographical transition, this time with her husband, from the UK to Australia. She owned 25 pairs of shoes, many of which stimulated detailed stories of her life abroad as well as in the colder, wetter climate of the North of England. One silver pair had been bought on a trip to Sydney with a previous partner, for a wedding in their home town of Melbourne. Theirs was a difficult relationship, soon to founder, as Luna explained:

I remember buying these shoes ... we were in Sydney for the weekend and I bought these shoes in Sydney, I bought my dress in Melbourne and I've still got the dress as well but these were probably, that was probably the last happy event that we had together.



**Figure 5.** Luna's Wedding Shoes

**5.6** Later in the interview Rachel asked Luna about her shoe inventory and she described how it had brought her 'missing' shoes to mind: 'I spent over two years of my life in Melbourne and I can't account for that, as far as shoes are concerned, and I definitely did buy shoes but I just don't know what happened to them and to be honest with you, I can't even remember what I bought, can't, I can't even, because I think that was a really tough relationship.'

**5.7** When the relationship finally broke up, Luna moved to China and here she relates her emotional transition into and out of grief:

... that time for me was such a tough time ... I don't know where the China ones are either, because that was really grieving for that relationship ... and the first pair of shoes that I bought when I came back from China were those ballet ones ...so maybe, you know, that was the start of something new ... I still won't get rid of them now, even though I know I'll probably never wear them again ...



**Figure 6.** Luna's Ballet Pumps

**5.8** Loss was also associated with a particular pair of shoes for David Clements, an 81 year-old case study participant. Rather than describing his wife's death, David directs Rachel's attention to his bedside photo of her during a detailed evocation of precisely how their two bodies moved together during sequence dancing. And just as Banim and Guy (2001) describe the journey of particular items of clothing, from from 'best' to 'work' to 'scruff' , so David's dancing shoes became surrogate 'slippers' for a while, by virtue of their lightness and soft leather. In the following data, David first describes the transitions these shoes have undergone, and then explains the distinctive way of dancing that they enable, using the photo of himself with his wife as an illustration.

... until my wife had a stroke we used to go sequence dancing ... twice a week to various dances and I bought these shoes after been going quite a while, because they are proper dance shoes. I bought them in Barnsley at a company that specialises in dance shoes and they were quite expensive for what they are ... it's very thin leather and ...while they look quite small compared with my other shoes they're not really inside, they seem to fit quite good. You can see. Now when I stopped dancing I started using them as an alternative for a, now and again, for a carpet slipper





**Figure 7.** David's Dancing Shoes

**5.9** Rachel asked David what was different about them to make them dancing shoes and he said:

... it's the weight of them, they're very nice and you just glide around you see ... you don't lift your feet up whilst you're dancing, it's mainly sliding about. ... If you see that picture on, just side of my bed there, that's myself and my wife, now if you look at the people in the background, you'll see that we've all got the same movement, can you see ... where the feet are, you'll see that everyone's got the, the left foot backwards. The right foot forward, and that's because, and they went round in a circle now, they're all, they're all the same, you see those in the background with the same foot on the ground, alright?

**5.10** One final example demonstrates how shoes that have survived their actual wearer can evoke one of the wearer's characteristic embodied activities, thereby taking on the status of a memento. Grace, in her eighties, described the pair of small Wellingtons that her mother had displayed on a doll-size sofa in her living room. They had belonged to Grace's five year-old nephew who had died whilst undergoing surgery for a congenital heart condition. Grace said:

When you look at them you can see him kicking up the leaves – a happy little body. He was there and then three days later he was gone.

The boy's Wellingtons stand for this poignant memory, long long after his death, quite literally moving Grace as she recalls them.

**5.11** The data presented in this paper show how shoes can become integral to life course transitions, such as becoming a teenager or independent adult, marrying or becoming a parent. In seeking to explain these associations, we showed some of the ways in which shoes can afford a particular kind of embodied experience of self, one which can include strong sensory and affective dimensions. These, however, need to be understood as the outcome of an interaction between the body itself, particularly the feet, and the individual's personal and social environment, a conjunction we described in terms of an external-internal dialectic of identification (Jenkins 2004). In that we have adopted a case study approach, what also becomes apparent are the ways in which such experiences accumulate, or indeed sediment, within the body. As such, shoes acquire the capacity to evoke emotion felt many years previously, in the same way that food, perfume or music play through and upon the senses. In this respect, then, shoes underline the argument that identity needs to be understood as an endlessly incomplete, embodied process (Jenkins 2004, Lawler 2008).

## Conclusion

**6.1** In the UK, Mintel estimate that it is fashion which is driving up expenditure on shoes, a growth of 30% across the last decade (<http://www.mintel.com/press-centre/press-releases/746/mintels-british-lifestyles-report-reveals-consumer-reaction-to-the-age-of-austerity>). Our research makes the current growth in spending on shoes a key starting point. It recognises that it is occurring within a social environment where a longstanding cultural association between footwear and identity transformation has been reconfigured in contemporary shoe design and advertising, in greetings cards, wrapping paper and stationery, and in popular music. However, our work also engages critically with two assumptions that are present in accounts of a fashion-driven growth in spending and a proliferation of shoe representation. First, these practices and representations are often taken as evidence of a distinctively modern project of self reinvention, one which neglects the historical and contemporary diversity of orientations towards identity. Second, as Benstock and Ferriss point out, there is an 'entrenched notion' that 'women, in particular, have an insatiable desire for collecting shoes' (2001: 2). These assumptions, we argue, restrict



the scope of sociological investigation, masking the contribution of footwear to the everyday transitions and transformations through which femininity, masculinity, ethnicity, age and social class are reproduced and resisted. It is to this broader understanding of footwear's contribution to identification, to its role within embodied processes of identity formation and re-formation, that our project is addressed. In order to meet this objective, we have engaged with the embodied experiences of a diversity of participants, entering into the materially-grounded practices of shoe shopping, storage, wear, maintenance and divestment. Rather than restricting our gaze to the shoe as a purely transformatory object, we are building a picture of its contribution, across time, to assemblages of clothing, embodiment and social environment. As Candy argues with respect to a garment, '[f]ar from merely signifying identity, the cut and structure of clothing may prompt or even instruct the somatic-self on how to hold itself and how to move in the world' (2010: 7.9). What our data on footwear indicate is that the one-off transformation afforded by Cinderella's glass slippers needs to be recognised as but a single moment within the dynamic processes of being and becoming who we are.

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## Notes

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Website: <<http://iftheshoefits.group.shef.ac.uk/>>.  
Facebook: <<http://www.facebook.com/pages/If-the-Shoe-Fits/1139797820225?sk=wall>>.

<sup>2</sup> The white stiletto and Sloane loafer are examples of the power of shoes to evoke stereotypical associations with class and gender. These associations are not, however, resistant to shifts and subversions (as the following link indicates), a common theme in post-structuralist and feminist analyses of fashion and consumer culture. Indeed these archetypal shoes invite reinvention through consumption and appropriation, suggesting that they themselves are as susceptible to transformation by the wearer, as the wearer is by the shoes: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/fashion/2012/oct/26/white-stilettos-let-heeling-begin>>.

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