Abstract

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 20 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 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 centred 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 Office for National Statistics, 2016. Overview of the UK population: February 2016. Available from: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/overviewoftheukpopulation/february2016#how-many-people-are-there-in-the-uk-and-how-does-this-change-over-time [Accessed 23 January 2016].), the pressure on health care services to manage age-related health and well-being challenges is mounting (Ashby and Beech 2016 Ashby, S. and Beech, R., 2016. Addressing the healthcare needs of an ageing population: the need for an integrated solution. International journal of collaborative research on internal medicine and public health, 8 (4), 316–320.,). 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 Sparkes, A.C., 2015. Ageing and embodied masculinities in physical activity settings: from flesh to theory and back again. In: E.Tulle and C. Phoenix, eds. Physical activity and sport in later life: critical perspectives. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 137–148.10.1007/978-1-137-42932-2, ), 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 Elias, N., 1978b. What is sociology? Columbia, SC: University Press. to describe the ways in which people are socially inclined towards and bonded with each other. Figurational 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 Cooper, L., et al., 2016. Transition from military into civilian life: an exploration of cultural competence. Armed forces and society, 1–22.) 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 et al. (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. 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 rationalised, health-related behaviours.

maintenance of good health is rarely a simple choice, as emerged from the accounts of our participants.


temporal aspects of the life course. Figurational theory has the potential for deepening and
developing the theorisation of embodiment, the body (Atkinson 2012 Atkinson, M., 2012. Norbert
61.) and ageing (Evans and Sleap 2012 Evans, A.B. and Sleap, M., 2012. “You feel like people are
looking at you and laughing”: Older adults’ perceptions of aquatic physical activity. Journal of ageing
experiences of leisure time aquatic physical activity in the United Kingdom. Leisure studies, 34
(3), 335–353., Evans and Crust 2015 Evans, A.B. and Crust, L., 2015. ‘Some of these people aren’t as
fit as us …’: experiencing the ageing, physically active body in cardiac rehabilitation. Qualitative
research in sport, exercise and health, 7 (1), 13–36.) and through the ‘systematic study of experience
and subjectivity’ (Bullington 2006 Bullington, J., 2006. Body and self: a phenomenological study on
the ageing body and identity. In: F. Rapport and P.Wainwright, eds. The self in health and
illness. Oxford: Radcliffe, 69–82., 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 Elias, N., 1970. What is
the human condition, 4 (3), 1–40.). The term ‘figuration’ was used by Elias (1978b)
Elias, N., 1978b. What is sociology? Columbia, SC: University Press. 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

In The Civilising Process, Elias (1982b Elias, N., 1982b. The civilising process. New York, NY: Pantheon. 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 Elias, N., 1982b. The civilising process. New York, NY: Pantheon. 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, N., 1982b. The
Elias, N. and Dunning, E., 1986. Quest for excitement. Oxford: B. Blackwell.) 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
Elias, N. and Dunning, E., 1986. Quest for excitement. Oxford: B. Blackwell.) ‘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
Evans, A.B. and Crust, L., 2015. ‘Some of these people aren’t as fit as us …’: experiencing the ageing, physically active body in cardiac rehabilitation. Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health, 7 (1), 13–36).

Culture and habitus are very slow to change, as Van Krieken (1998 Van Krieken, R., 1998. Norbert Elias. London: Routledge.) emphasises, and it is only over relatively long spans of time that one can trace habitus, including through embodied experiences occurring over a lifetime (Evans and Sleap 2014 Evans, A.B. and Sleap, M., 2014. Older adults’ lifelong embodied experiences of leisure time aquatic physical activity in the United Kingdom. Leisure studies, 34 (3), 335–353., .). 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 Summerfield, P., 2010. Dunkirk and the popular memory of Britain at War, 1940–58. Journal of contemporary history, 45 (4), 788–811.10.1177/0022009410375260, .). 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

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 Elias, N., 1985. The loneliness of the dying. Oxford: Blackwell., Evans and Sleap 2012 Evans, A.B. and Sleap, M., 2012. “You feel like people are looking at you and laughing”: Older adults’ perceptions of aquatic physical activity. Journal of ageing studies, 23 (4), 515–526., , Evans and Crust 2015 Evans, A.B. and Crust, L., 2015. ‘Some of these people aren’t as fit as us …’:
experiencing the ageing, physically active body in cardiac rehabilitation. *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health*, 7 (1), 13–36.) , and the current research sought to contribute to this small but developing literature. Elias ([1939] 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] 1964) 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] 1964] Cooley, C.H., [1902] 1964. *Human nature and the social order*. New York, NY: Schocken., p. 151, 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). Symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective for multiple method research. *Journal of advanced nursing*, 33 (4), 541–547.10.1046/j.1365-2648.2001.01680.x According to Mead (1934) 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) 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 Blumer, H., 1969. *Symbolic interactionism: perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.) in turn developed Meadian theory, with an emphasis on how the self evolves from the interactive process of joint action (Denzin 1992 Denzin, N.K., 1992. *Symbolic interactionism and cultural studies: the politics of interpretation*. Oxford: Blackwell.), where individuals engage in mindful action, which allows them to manipulate symbols and negotiate the meanings of different situations (Mead 1934 Mead, G.H., 1934. *Mind, self and society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.). Like Mead, Blumer (1969 Blumer, H., 1969. *Symbolic interactionism: perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.) 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 Blumer, H., 1969. *Symbolic interactionism: perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall., 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 Snow, D.A., 2001. Extending and broadening Blumer’s conceptualization of symbolic interactionism. *Symbolic interaction*, 24 (3), 367–377.10.1525/si.2001.24.3.367) , for example, argues that Blumer’s (1969 Blumer, H., 1969. *Symbolic interactionism: perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.) 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 Sparkes, A.C., 2015. Ageing and embodied masculinities in physical activity settings: from flesh to theory and back again. *In*: E.Tulle and C. Phoenix, eds. *Physical activity and sport in later life: critical perspectives*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 137–148.10.1007/978-1-137-42932-2). 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’ (Allen-Collinson, 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, Rachel, primarily via three semi-structured focus group interviews. Our participants were 20 retired servicemen (13 retired Army servicemen and seven retired Royal Air Force (RAF) servicemen) aged 60+, who were members of the RBL in a city in the English Midlands. Participants were initially opportunistically sampled, which allowed Rachel to take advantage of unexpected opportunities (see Gratton and Jones 2010) as they arose within the context of the RBL environment. For example, Rachel 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 20 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 Wilkinson, S., 1998. Focus groups in feminist research: power, interaction and the co-production of meaning. Women’s studies international forum, 21 (1), 111–125.10.1016/S0277-5395(97)00080-0) and are regarded by some as constituting a more ‘naturalistic’ approach in comparison with individual interviews (Finch and Lewis 2003 Finch, H. and Lewis, J., 2003. Focus groups. In: J. Ritchie and J. Lewis, eds. Qualitative research practice: a guide for social science students and researchers. London: Sage, 170–198. ). 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 et al.’s (2016 Braun, V., Clarke, V., and Weate, P., 2016. Using thematic analysis in sport and exercise research. In: B. Smith and A.C.Sparkes, eds. Routledge handbook of qualitative research in sport and exercise. London: Routledge, 191–205. , pp. 117, 118) six-phase thematic analysis (TA) model. First, Rachel 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 Tracy, S., 2010. Qualitative quality: eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. Qualitative inquiry, 16 (10), 837–851.10.1177/1077800410383121). In congruence with Braun et al. (2016) Braun, V., Clarke, V., and Weate, P., 2016. Using thematic analysis in sport and exercise research. In: B. Smith and A.C.Sparkes, eds. Routledge handbook of qualitative research in sport and exercise. London: Routledge, 191–205. , 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 Sparkes, A.C. and Smith, B., 2014. Qualitative research methods in sport, exercise and health: From process to product. Abingdon: Routledge. , 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 recounced 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 Hockey, J., 1986. Squaddies: portrait of a subculture. Exeter: Exeter University Press.) notes, recruits are subjected to processes of harsh, rigorous organisational socialisation. This is a form of ‘secondary socialisation’ (Berger and Luckman 1976 Berger, P. and Luckman, T., 1976. The social construction of reality. Harmondsworth: Penguin., 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 Hockey, J., 2004. No more heroes: Masculinity in the infantry. In: R. Jamieson, ed. The criminology of war. Farnham: Ashgate, 401–411.). 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 Elias, N. and Dunning, E., 1986. Quest for excitement. Oxford: B. Blackwell. on the ‘sparet ime spectrum’) and often generated experiences of ‘intense embodiment’ where the body is brought, sometimes acutely, to conscious mind by physical demands (Allen-Collinson and Owton 2015 Allen-Collinson, J. and Owton, H., 2015. Intense embodiment: senses of heat in women’s running and boxing. Body & society, 21 (2), 245–268.):

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 Hockey, J., 1986. Squaddies: portrait of a subculture. Exeter: Exeter University Press.). From a figurational perspective, these military activities were designed processually to ‘civilise’ recruits’ bodies (see also Atkinson 2012 Atkinson, M., 2012. Norbert Elias and the body. In: B.S. Turner, ed. The Routledge handbook of the body. London: Routledge, 49–61.). The ability to pass through this stage of military service constitutes a rite de passage (Van Gennep 1960 Van Gennep, A., 1960. The rites of passage. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.); 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 Hockey, J., 2004. No more heroes: Masculinity in the infantry. In: R. Jamieson, ed. The criminology of war. Farnham: Ashgate, 401–411.). The popular cliché highlighted by Hockey (2004 Hockey, J., 2004. No more heroes: Masculinity in the infantry. In: R. Jamieson, ed. The criminology of war. Farnham: Ashgate, 401–411.), 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

Hockey, J., 2004. No more heroes: Masculinity in the infantry. In: R. Jamieson, ed. The criminology of war. Farnham: Ashgate, 401–411.). 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 Hockey, J., 2004. No more heroes: Masculinity in the infantry. In: R. Jamieson, ed. The criminology of war. Farnham: Ashgate, 401–411.), 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 Evans and Sleap (2014 Evans, A.B. and Sleap, M., 2014. Older adults’ lifelong embodied experiences of leisure time aquatic physical activity in the United Kingdom. Leisure studies, 34 (3), 335–353., ) 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 Elias, N., 1982b. The civilising process. New York, NY: Pantheon., see also Evans and Sleap 2012 Evans, A.B. and Sleap, M., 2012. “You feel like people are looking at you and laughing”: Older adults’ perceptions of aquatic physical activity. Journal of ageing studies, 23 (4), 515–526., ). 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 e.g. Department of Health, Physical Activity, Health Improvement, and Protection 2011. Start active, stay active: a report on physical activity from the four home countries’ chief medical officers. London: Department of Health, Physical Activity, Health Improvement and Protection, 2011. Start active, stay active: a report on physical activity from the four home countries’ chief medical officers. London: Department of Health, Physical Activity, Health Improvement and Protection, 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)


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 10 miles 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 Stryker, S., 1981. Symbolic interactionism: themes and variations. In: M. Rosenbergen and R. Turner, eds. Social psychology: sociological perspectives. New York, NY: Basic Books, 3–29., Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2007 Allen-Collinson, J. and Hockey, J., 2007. ‘Working out’ identity: distance runners and the management of disrupted identity. Leisure studies, 26 (4), 381–398., ) especially when this contrasts negatively and poignantly with a former ‘gloried self’ (Allen-Collinson 2005 Allen-Collinson, J., 2005. Emotions, interaction and the injured sporting body. International review for the sociology of sport, 40 (2), 221–240., ). 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 Hockey, J., 2004. No more heroes: Masculinity in the infantry. In: R. Jamieson, ed. The criminology of war. Farnham: Ashgate, 401–411., Jamieson 2017 Jamieson, R., 2017. The criminology of war. Abingdon: Routledge., ) 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 Hinojosa, R., et al., 2008. Constructions of continuity after stroke. Symbolic interaction, 31 (2), 205–224.10.1525/si.2008.31.2.205, ) 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 Elias, N., 1982a. Civilization and violence: on the state monopoly of physical violence and its infringements. Telos, 1982 (54), 134–154.10.3817/1282054134 Elias, N., 1996. The Germans: studies of power struggles and the development of habitus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Oxford: Polity Press., ) 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] 1964 Cooley, C.H., [1902] 1964. Human nature and the social order. New York, NY: Schocken., ) 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 (Allen-Collinson 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) 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 (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2007). ‘Working out’ identity: distance runners and the management of disrupted identity. Leisure studies, 26 (4), 381–398., Spencer 2009. Habit(us), body techniques and body callusing: an ethnography of mixed martial arts. Body & society, 15 (4), 119–143.10.1177/1357034X09347224, .). 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). “Head down, Bergen on, mind in neutral”: the infantry body. Journal of political and military sociology, 30 (1), 148–171. ) illustrates well the ‘valorisation of endurance’ (Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2015). Hockey, J. and Allen-Collinson, J., 2015. Digging. In: the sociological phenomenology of ‘doing endurance’ in distance-running. In: W. Bridel, P. Markulaand J. Denison, eds. Endurance running: a socio-cultural examination. London: Routledge, 227–242., 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 (Evans and Crust 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 Evans and Sleap (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 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...


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
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 emphasised 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. Evans and Sleap 2012; Evans and Crust 2015) to which body of work the current study contributes. Elias (1939, 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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