Commodification of the Body and Corporate Discipline

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Introduction

It has been argued that in Western societies there are tendencies to encourage us to believe that we can achieve personal fulfilment alongside the space for self-expression and personal growth. But as noted by Craib (1994), these beliefs require us to balance a paradox between our aspirations and the pragmatic realisation that we might not become the person we want to be or achieve the career or other successes we truly desire; that these ambitions might be distant goals which we might never achieve. However, as Craib states, occupying this position and potentially modifying these hopes - making a compromise with ‘reality’ - can be a painful one because of the cultural value attached to self-fulfilment and self-expression. This is exacerbated by the uncertainties we experience in our wider environment:

‘And it is as if, in response to this immense uncertainty, we have to believe in the certainties of our own desires. The tangles and confusions that we get ourselves into when trying to maintain these certainties come to seem preferable to the pain of disappointment and uncertainty.’ (Craib, 1994: 6)

What follows is an argument for the importance of disappointment and what Freud (cited in Craib, 1994: 39) termed ‘normal human misery’ through an investigation of the problematic investment we are encouraged to make in the body. As noted by Shilling:

‘With the decline of formal religious frameworks in the West which constructed and sustained existential and ontological certainties residing outside the individual, and the massive rise of the body in consumer culture as a bearer of symbolic value, there is a tendency for people in high modernity to place ever more importance on the body as constitutive of the self.’ (Shilling, 2003: 2 – emphasis in the original).

This is heightened by a development within society where many no longer place faith in religious authority, grand political narratives or ideologies – or have a world view provided by these meaning structures, so ‘…at least the body initially appears to provide a firm foundation on which to reconstruct a reliable sense of self in the modern world’ (Shilling, ibid – emphasis added).

Offering an example from sport, allied to a psychodynamic approach, an illustration of the problematic – indeed illusory and inevitably transient nature of this investment - will be made by focusing on the increasingly complex relationships athletes and organizations have with the body. Using the case of English cricketer, Andy Flintoff, I will explore the matrix of forces at play upon the body of the elite sportsperson and the interplay this has with ‘traditional’ companies; outlining the heightened investment and symbolism made here – offering a Kleinian (Klein, 1952) analysis to stakeholder responses to physical and ‘hence’ performative failure. Ultimately I will argue that experiencing and holding the anxiety at the heart of these processes is not necessarily comfortable, or necessarily encouraged – because of the suffering it involves; a suffering rooted in a return to infantile states. If we can hold that anxiety, following Klein, there is the possibility for holding the paradox mentioned by Craib: a crucial one for athletes, organizations and those who are stakeholders in both.
Bodies & Anxiety

As previously outlined ‘in conditions of high modernity, there is a tendency for the body to become increasingly central to the modern person’s sense of self-identity’ (Shilling, 2003: 1). The evidence of such a view can be found in the media focus on body image and the promotion and preservation of youth, beauty and sexual desire. This has been accompanied by growing numbers of people utilising their body shape and appearance as a means of expressing their individual identity; developing them into social symbols that give messages to others. Such a process often involves viewing the body as a project, an entity in the process of becoming and therefore open to reconstruction in line with the designs of its owner – with the inherent acknowledgement that such bodies are not found ‘naturally’. Citing Beck (1999) Shilling notes that it is surely significant that regimes of health, beauty and self-care referred to above are potentially promoting the body as a place of ontological security in a global system characterised by multiple and inescapable risks. To follow Lasch (1991), observing a millennial society where its citizens spurn community or forms of collectivity in preference for unyielding self-regard and the emergence of a new morality of self-gratification, argues that one aspect of this behaviour is a demand for physical perfection – a bodily orientation – involving a fear of ageing and sickness:

‘…having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet…’ (Lasch, 1991: 40).

This suggests that the essentially harmless activities outlined above have been elevated into a programme and wrapped in the rhetoric of authenticity and awareness, with a possible reading of the intensity of focus being that it offers a means of conquering a deep sense of insecurity.

But such a focus on the body has its limitations, because ultimately the effort expended here is doomed to failure (and thus anxiety) as bodies do not always allow themselves to be moulded in accordance to our intentions (Orbach, 1988; Chernin, 1983; Martin, 1989) and they inevitably decay, age and die. What then are the consequences for those who live for themselves and place the body at the centre of their self-identity? Such a process is exacerbated further because, as noted by Bourdieu (1985), whilst there is a relative intractability of corporeal habits and customs, (as denoted by his concept of ‘hexus’ and ‘habitus’), it is important to note here that these orientations are not always static because an individual’s body is never fully ‘finished’; it is constantly affected by social, cultural and economic processes – as can be seen in the growing body of literature focusing on the extent to which the production and maintenance of ‘gendered bodies’ is sustained through (changing) social and cultural norms governing women’s behaviour and its appearance – as denoted by discourses on beauty and cosmetics (Wolf, 1991), fashion (Young, 1990), sports and exercise (Barthky, 1990). Tyler and Abbot (1998) also demonstrate that the work of a female flight attendant involves adhering to culturally prescribed norms on femininity as well as organisational regulations concerning her figure – its presentation, and performance. They illustrate how women place themselves under a form of self-surveillance by adopting the ‘male’ values of the ‘ideal’ female bodily form and reinforcing this ideal on themselves as well as other women employees.

As noted by Goffman (1969) ‘the presentation of self’ is now seen as signifying the real character of individuals. In contemporary consumer culture this has promoted the experience of both becoming their bodies, in the sense of identifying themselves either negatively or positively with its ‘exterior’ presentation, and of being regularly anxious about the possibility that their body will let them down or fall apart if they withdraw from constant work and scrutiny. Goffman’s focus on how people present themselves shows individuals as actors seeking to advance their own interests by staging appropriate performances that are threatened constantly by the possibility of embarrassment or failure. Thus, the management and moulding of the body has become increasingly central to the presentation of self-
image. Hence health promotion and fitness programmes can operate as a means of both advancing personal interest by subjecting themselves to this discipline – one written on the body. ‘Thus, from being an optional benefit, regimes of health promotion are easily transformed into another standard of managerial judgement’ (Goss, 1997: 3). This notion of body anxiety is central to the way many people perceive their bodies as projects and is also linked to the experience of the environment as dangerous and out of control with clear resonance for our experiences of organizational longevity: both creators of ontological and employment anxiety.

This corporate parallel has seen an interesting intersection between the qualities required of employees in a wider organizational environment often driven by fast-paced change, working in flatter, more quality-driven companies where the exponential rise in personal coaching and executive training for fitness for business sees the discipline of the body and personal commitment to its improvement becoming an active metaphor for discipline within and commitment to the organization. (Goss, 1997). Whilst, according to Goss, this does not mean that engagement in such behaviours, or initiatives like workplace health and fitness promotion, becomes compulsory, it develops a normative power creating informal pressures to conform. This could be especially acute where such initiatives are being driven by senior managers and/or this is coupled with job insecurity - such that non-participation is equated with a lack of job commitment with concertive expression (Barker 1993) being revealed as peers are shunned for promotion and rewards if they appear unable to portray fitness and superior control of their ever-errant bodies.

**Sports Bodies**

For professional sportsmen and women this relationship with the body is additionally complex. Not only is it the vehicle for performance – sports after all involve an engagement in movement and motion of the body in given ways – but it is increasingly the site of an intersection between processes of ‘hypercommodification’ (Giulianotti, 2002) and the disciplinary mechanisms of sports science being performed upon the athlete’s body; partially enforced through the panopticon of the media gaze (Cashmore, 2000) which aims to ensure the replication of *appropriate* sports bodies. Additionally, professional sportspeople and sports teams can operate as powerful signifiers of class, nationality, politics, gender, borderless and bordered lives (Wong and Trumper, 2002). As professionals, and in their extra mural activities, their actions and attainments now possess far greater significance than they have ever had whilst, as individuals, they arguably wield a highly variable degree of control over the signifiers attached to them and their meanings.

Giulianotti’s definition of commodification is ‘a process by which an object or social practice acquires an exchange value or market-centred meaning.’ It is not a single but ongoing process, often involving the gradual entry of market logic to the various elements that constitute the object or social practice under consideration. The marked intensification of this process within the sports domain in recent years is of a different order to that experienced in the late 1980s and could therefore be termed as a period of hypercommodification. But whilst the development of this concept is primarily focused on football, this particular sport has arguably led the realignment and heightened ‘mediaisation’ of other sports within the UK during this period: potentially operating as the originator of these trends. This process of hypercommodification has tended to involve the efforts of sports governing bodies and club directors and owners to attract wealthier audiences – especially where they had been absent or marginal – to attend games. This was recognised by the English football authorities in the early 1990s following a period when the sport had been in the doldrums and was facing the apparently terminal blight of routinised problems of serious spectator disorder.

‘In the 1990s and beyond, patterns of affluence and the associated fragmentation of circumstances and interests make it almost impossible to formulate any leisure activity as a truly mass market one. The implication is that hard choices have to be made as to the consumer segment to which the offer is to be targeted, and hence the ingredients of that offer. As implied above, the response of most sectors has been to move upmarket so as to follow the affluent ‘middle class’ consumer in his or her pursuits and
aspirations. We strongly suggest that there is a message in this for football and particularly for the
design of stadia for the future.’
(The Football Association, 1991: 8-9)

The F.A.s ‘Blueprint for Football’ led to the sport targeting those engaging in the burgeoning leisure
market emerging in the late 1980s – aiming to increase the appeal of the sport to this audience
involving a profound shift in the ‘customer base’ for football. Such a social realignment of the sport
also has consequences for concepts of community and the traditional ties clubs have had with the
communities they are located within (Williams, 1996). With the increasing number of new all-seater
stadia being located outside city centres, the increase in levels of mobility through car ownership and a
reliance on it to facilitate leisure spending, there then comes a pressure to sustain the psychological
attachment between clubs and supporters. As the Henley Centre stated:

‘...the question of finding new mechanisms to cultivate this attachment which do not rely on physical
proximity is a pressing one.’
(The Football Association, 1991: 13)

It did not take long for these ‘new mechanisms’ to emerge.

Since the late 1980s, hypercommodification has been driven by diverse but extraordinary volumes of
capital that have entered sports from entirely new sources such as satellite and pay-per-view TV
networks, the Internet and telecommunications corporations, transnational sports equipment
manufacturers, public relations companies and the major stock markets through the sale of club equity.
Simultaneously, a new set of social and cultural relations arose during this period: seeing the greater
migration of elite sports labour, the gradual proliferation of continental and global competitions, the
huge rise in the salaries of elite sportspersons and women within some sports, new media outlets for
sports (e.g. satellite TV, club TV, the Internet and the new generation of mobile phones) and new
forms of cultural encoding through these media. Arguably, these new forms of encoding hinge around
the personalities, attainments and the bodies of key sports figures. It is this tapestry that has seen the
rise of the superstars such as David Beckham and, more recently, Wayne Rooney.

The Marketing of Sports Bodies

One aspect of the shift in these social and cultural relations can be seen in the marketing of sports (and
associated products) through the use of images of those who play them. Whilst the use of recognised
sports personalities within marketing campaigns is not new and has a lengthy history, the nature and
extent to their use is. Even English cricket captains are now regularly used to publicise national
tournaments – presenting the sport and using their status in ways their predecessors even five years
ago would never have experienced. Therefore, billboard posters for BBC Radio 4’s continuous
coverage of the 2003 One Day International (ODI) series against South Africa and Zimbabwe utilised
the bruised and stitched face of the then newly promoted England captain, Michael Vaughan, to
symbolise the ‘no hiding place’ attitude of the game supposedly occurring in both the enactment and
coverage of this tournament thus providing a harder edge for the presentation of these series of games
which one would not traditionally associate with this sport or with the traditionally genteel radio
coverage provided by the BBC.

But more importantly, if Vaughan had been a more discreetly known sports figure (it could be argued
he was known then to cricket aficionados but less recognised outside the game) his elevation to
national ODI captain has ended that and the poster campaign potentially stimulates curiosity for those
who are unaware of who he is, what he does and the ‘battle’ he is engaged in (who is this battered man
with a cricket bat?). The upside is the potential for gaining ‘customers’ for the matches either as
listeners or as spectators. But if Vaughan’s level of public recognition has accelerated, his status has
been used to market the sport he plays for and the team he leads, along with a specific tournament, its
sponsors and (surely inadvertently) the satellite TV network covering the ODI series. The previously
reticent figure of Vaughan is now directly and indirectly a vehicle for marketing a plethora of products financing his sport – and financing him as a player. He can no longer remain a shadowy figure even if he wanted to.

Additionally, the new forms of cultural encoding of sports has seen further developments in the ways in which sports themselves are reported and represented across the media with certain events, matches and players attaining a symbolism that extends beyond the confines of the sport with the sportspeople involved within such events being subjected to a degree of scrutiny and representational manipulation that is unparalleled and, as stated, is rarely within the control of the sportsmen and women, their clubs or governing bodies. Thus, sportspeople can be presented as symbols of national identity. For example, Chisholm (1999) shows how the U.S. Olympic gymnastics team’s victory in the 1996 games was portrayed as a final victory in the cold war with the gymnasts themselves and their attainments being described in military terms. Maguire et al, (1999) illustrate that the media coverage of the England versus German football match in Euro 96 illustrated the existence of an agenda based around nostalgia and ethnic assertiveness/defensiveness on the part of the English press, with references to the Second World War and the World Cup victory of 1966. The German press preferred to focus on the contemporary European political situation to assert their superiority over England – and to take further satisfaction from the victorious performance of their football team. Finally, Madan (2000) illustrates how World Series Cricket in Australia becomes a space for ‘diasporic nationalism’, creating an Indian reality in a non-Indian place. Additionally, sportspeople can also operate as signifiers of class (Foote, 2003) and gender (Sparkes and Smith, 2002; Mennesson, 2000; Chisholm, op cit). This ‘manipulation’ of national sporting events and sports people is successful in engaging emotion because, as acknowledged by Weiss, sport is shaped by and derives symbolic significance from its close links with society.

‘With its classic, socioculturally valid and transparent norms, it forms a social subsystem in which different types of identity reinforcement can be found through…a sports performance; or it can be experienced vicariously as sport spectator.’
(Weiss, 2001: 393)

For him, in modern societies there is no other social subsystem that gives so many people, regardless of their religion, gender, age or social or educational level, access to a system of social validation and acknowledgement by others. Arguably the sports media are both aware and exploit such social validation and the feelings sports performances can and do engender in those who watch and follow a sport or a particular event – they are often involved personally with these processes as supporters/sports watchers themselves.

In the UK, the early 1990s and the emergence of a now major TV network has had a huge impact on the TV coverage of a range of sports and the utilisation of increasingly sophisticated production values. It could be argued that this sea change in presentation was and is not confined to football but has extended to include a complete revision of the ways in which sports and sportspeople are depicted across the full range of media forms. The commitment made by the (then) new TV sports provider Sky to raise such standards concerning their presentation of the English football’s Premier League not only enhanced the league’s status in its early days but

‘…forced a reaction by the other media who were fearful of being left by the wayside. Commercial radio and the tabloids in particular responded in a manner which brought a quantum leap in the perceived importance of football. Under Sky, the game blossomed from being merely a 90-minute action spectacle, into an art form worthy of discussion and analysis. Sport as drama. Sport as soap opera. If it was always the most important sport in the country, it was now the second, third and fourth most important sport as well.’
(Feen and Davidson, 1996: 217)
It is now a drama played out and marketed through the lives, performances, personalities and bodies of sportsmen and women. For Cashmore (2000), there is a strong link between the sports body and the ideal vision of the body portrayed within commodity culture. Given that the sporting body can be (at the highest levels of a high profile sport) a commodified body with elite athletes literally being bought and sold by the clubs they play for, whilst also commanding huge sums for endorsements. Additionally here, as noted with the example of Michael Vaughan, those who gain pre-eminence within their sport will now be used to advertise it. For TV companies and sports sponsors, it is clearly desirable, if not imperative that the ambassadors for those sports possess a physique that can operate as a vehicle for marketing as well as performative purposes.

The implications within an organizational setting have been profound (especially within North America) as employees are implicitly held to account for their own body image and behaviours; going some way to explaining the 1990s incantation that everyone “wanted to be like Mike.”[1] As Helstein (2003) shows, through an analysis of the politics and production of desire within Nike advertising to women, how the organization through its association of knowledge power and truth has and continues to publicise and authorise a specific notion of who or what counts as a female athlete. This is manifest when an examination of the pairing of the themes of ‘commitment’, ‘excellence’ and ‘emancipation’ is made in relation to a specific set of Nike advertisements.

‘Athletes are driven by commitment, to their sport, to themselves, to excellence itself. Commitment fuels the extra mile, the final set, the last quarter, the sprint to the line, going on, when the body begs to stop…’

As noted by her, the campaign indicated that by following the prescriptions of the discourse – working on the body, eating healthy food, exercising and so on – the female athlete would undergo self-transformation and growth. Whilst Helstein does not make the connection between organizational and sports connotations held by these themes, there is clearly a high degree of resonance between the language used by Nike in their advertisements and the influential excellence literature of the late 1980s and 1990s and the (controversial) themes of empowerment that still echo within HR discourse.

‘…the female athlete who competes hard and only accepts excellence is ‘within the true’ and that way of being an athlete (or at least an aspiration to it) has become the legitimate choice. Therefore, the empowerment and self-acceptance that could be achieved through exercise…is now achieved through working on the body in ways that produce excellence. This is the latest prescription for self-transformation within the discourse of Nike.’
(Helstein, 2003: 281)

As an increasing number of athletes are used within corporations – as inspirational figures, ambassadors, motivational speakers, or promoters of internal fitness and health promotion campaigns – there is a triadic relationship emerging between the body of the athlete, the advertisers who utilise the performative and aesthetic qualities of the body to sell its products, and organizations who also utilise the achievements and wider social signifiers of the athlete for the company’s own disciplinary performative purposes.

Applying a Foucauldian analysis here, the body is the archetypal subject of power and political control with power relations operating through and inscribed upon it often in subtle rather than coercive ways. We incline towards conformity because of the involvement in discourse that prescribes ranges of normality for the human body and thereby human behaviour. This does not preclude resistance, but it can be difficult to resist these processes of regulation emerging from powerful institutions – be they sports bodies, advertisers or employers. In the sports domain there is a strong overlap between discourses on the healthy body and the sporting body with those of medicine, public health and sport all emphasising a controlled, self disciplined body with the ideal being similar across all of these discourses and involving technologies of the self directed at achieving the best possible self via an
enduring, on-going project. As Cashmore acknowledges, the bodies of professional sportspeople are subject to extensive regulation as the degree of control being exerted within that environment increases due to the use of sports science technologies to develop physical performance through training, dietary regimes and to detect ‘unlawful’ drug use. Recent field work with an English Premier League football team, known for its innovative investment in sports science, indicated that one aspect of their focus on this area (which includes a focus on psychology) was not only formative. Because of the degree of surveillance, daily measurement and monitoring of the body occurring there, it meant that the individual player has ‘no excuses’; failure to perform was thereby transferred from the potential province of the backroom staff to the highly exposed individual and collective of the team[2].

Therefore, if, for the contemporary self it is believed that the body conveys the thoughts and dispositions of the ‘owner’, given the inextricable link between self-identity and embodiment, the deportment and appearance of the body has become highly important. For those whose bodies will be used to promote the sports they play and upon which so much depends, they have to indicate engagement with the body project by providing evidence – the fit, measured, monitored, healthy body. The attainment of this body, as stated previously, does not come ‘naturally’ – it is a personal achievement requiring constant work and vigilance. Through the presentation of their bodies, sports people demonstrate (or not) their capacity for self-discipline and heightened self-control: an ability to overcome the sins of the flesh. Therefore, sports stars who are physically unfit or ill are increasingly presented by some media reporters as anomalous – as seen in the ribbing of Australian cricketer Shane Warne in the 1996/7 test season due to his weight gain; the criticism of American tennis player, Monica Seles at Wimbledon in 1997 for the same reason. In both cases, the suggestion was that such elite athletes should not allow their bodies to disintegrate to such an extent. Another reading might point to the pre-eminent status both possessed within their respective sports and the implications their weight gain had for a range of stakeholders because such less-than perfect sports people, including those who may spectacularly fall from moral grace, cannot be used as authentic role models for corporate (or any other form) of consumption.

The failing body and its significance

But injuries and the decline of the sporting body are inevitable – even though the longevity of sports careers are being extended due to advances in medical treatment of injuries, better dietary and exercise regimes (Adams, 1999). Yet the experience of injury and bodily decline can still be experienced as debilitating with more serious injuries and operations raising questions as to what level of performance will be possible on return to fitness.

Illustrating the pattern of dealing with the ageing, declining sporting body, former Ireland football international, Tony Cascarino, describes his first steps in the morning thus:

‘I pull back the sheets and swivel my legs on the floor. My knee, as usual, has seized during the night. I run my fingers across the joint and feel the bone and cartilage grinding like a rusty old gate. The first step of the day is always the most painful. First, I lift my heel off the floor and flex my leg gently. Then, placing my hands on the side of the bed for the launch, I push forward, taking the weight on my left leg and hold the post of the bed for support. By the time I have limped from the wardrobe to the bathroom to the kitchen, I am almost walking normally.’

Cascarino (2001:2)

But even though he experiences such pain and, after nineteen years of playing, endures the ‘killing’ boredom of playing and training, there is still the desire to play: ‘I still get anxious when the manager names the team. I still get excited when Saturday comes…’ (Cascarino, 2001: 3) and playing is still a crucial element of constructing the self. ‘They call me ‘Tony Goal’ in these parts…Only six other players can boast a better strike rate this season in the French first division. My name will ring a bell in every village Café des Sports’ (Cascarino, 2001: 5). This transition period into another way of life arguably mirrors the internal process of dealing with injury as a shift occurs from the body being
experienced in a state of primary immediacy – a state of being when the body functions and performs tasks without conscious effort and there is an overriding unity between the body and the self: the body becomes an absent presence. Injuries disrupt this sense of body-self unity and can lead to heightened identity dilemmas through being unable to measure up to past self, resulting in further preoccupation with it (Sparkes and Smith, 2002).

But, as these authors also note sports are also a primary masculine-validating experience, with the body often being the central foundation of how men define themselves and how they are defined by others: sport and being a man going together. So, given the context where masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men’s bodies, sports has come to be the leading definier of masculinity in mass culture though providing a continuous display of men’s bodies in motion. Therefore masculinity is also vulnerable when performance cannot be sustained (for the viewer and for the athlete himself). This also applies to the arguments made previously about self-identity and the focus on the body. If gendered or other forms of identity focused on the body become ruptured due to injury, anxiety is heightened because injury is not just injury, it will tap into profound psychological processes and challenge our investment in the body (our own and those of others where we have an emotional or other investment in the outcomes of activities those bodies undertake).

So, for stakeholders in the sports performance, injury also heightens anxiety: the more pivotal the athlete or player, the more crucial the performance, the higher the anxiety. A prime example of this being the angst experienced prior to the World Cup Finals in 2002 when the England team captain, David Beckham broke a metatarsal in his left foot, thus provoking fevered speculation as to whether he would be able to play and if so, to what standard? Tabloid newspapers urged their readers to lobby senior church figures to offer prayers for Beckham’s left foot with Prime Minister, Tony Blair breaking off from affairs of state to tell colleagues that nothing was more important to England’s World Cup preparations than the condition of Beckham’s metatarsal. But Beckham’s injury had other implications as noted by Craven and Allen (2002):

‘If Beckham misses the World Cup, his sponsorship value will dip sharply. A successful tournament could earn him £10,000,000 on top of deals already signed with companies including Adidas for £3,000,000 a year, Brylcreem and Police sunglasses for £1,000,000 a year and Pepsi for £500,000. Rage software signed the star for computer and video games promotions in an attempt to get back into profitability. Now its £1,000,000 a year deal with royalties could look expensive.’

Ultimately what such ‘crises’ do is to force those who emotionally, financially or otherwise invest in performance to confront the possibility and the actuality of disappointment as evidenced in the problematic nature of investing in the inherently risky body (our own and others) as islands of stability and security. With the inevitable corollary being that if such people cannot be all that they want: feted, championed, loved and spoiled as they are or achieve what they are allegedly capable of then what hope is there for us who do not have those advantages? What hopes for the body to retain its form? What hopes for our lives, our dreams and ambitions? And how do we react? And inevitably the corporation that tries to model and discipline itself is similarly denied the opportunity to maintain a powerful disciplinary metaphor for its employees. These issues will now be highlighted through utilising the example of England and Lancashire cricketer, Andy Flintoff and analysed via Kleinian concepts of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions.

The case of Andy Flintoff

At the close of the final India v England one-day international (ODI) cricket match in January 2002, the English bowler, Andy Flintoff secured a vital victory for the visiting side. With India needing 6 runs from 3 balls, Flintoff ran out and bowled Indian batsmen Kumble and Srinath in consecutive balls. This secured a draw for England in the ODI games, restoring an element of esteem to a side that had lost the preceding test series 1-0. Flintoff celebrated this victory – and a fine individual performance with bat and ball – by removing his shirt and running around the Wankhede stadium
swinging it around his head. Such a gesture is rarely, if ever, seen within this sport and is more usually associated with football when players celebrate important goals: ones that secure important victories for their sides or are beautifully crafted pieces of dexterity and skill. But Flintoff’s gesture symbolises more that the ‘footballisation’ of cricket. For during the previous season, he had been heavily criticised by the English sports press for being overweight with this being cited as a significant reason for his under achievement and his failure to materialise as the inheritor to Ian Botham’s mantle of great English all-rounder.[3]

Flintoff debuted for Lancashire County Cricket Club in 1995 at the age of 18, gaining a place in the national Test squad in 1998. A frequently explosive and entertaining batsman as well as a useful and economical fast-medium bowler, he uses all of his powerful build and height – he is 6’ 4” tall – in order to hit the ball extremely hard. But whilst showing enormous potential in county cricket, and winning awards for his performances, his Test career had been somewhat erratic with some promising performances being offset against recurring injury. However, these injury problems coincided with media and management concerns about his attitude and weight – with his nickname ‘Freddie’ being a reference to the character in the Flintstones cartoon who also shared a substantial appetite for food.

‘The England management, disappointed by his easy-going attitude, revealed that he weighed 17st 12lb – heavier than Lennox Lewis. His England team-mates called him FS, standing for Fat Slogger. And even when he played well he was greeted by such tabloid headlines as ‘Praise the Lard.’” (Weaver, 2000)

But, it was in the tours of New Zealand and India in 2001/2 where he made genuine strides towards attaining the international potential he had always promised. With a remodelled bowling action he made a telling contribution to the one-day series where the captain, Nasser Hussain, was prepared to bowl him at crucial points of one day cricket matches. Given this short précis of Flintoff’s career and the more recent stringent criticisms made against him, (‘It was that his girth become a much-discussed metaphor for his attitude: there was a frustration among his critics that the happy-go-lucky lad from Preston seemed to lack a real focus for anything other than a free buffet’ (White: 2002)) the removal of the shirt simultaneously demonstrated defiance of those taunts as well as physical conformity with media imposed ‘norms’ as to what constitutes the elite sports body because it was evident that he had lost a substantial amount of weight (over three stone by his own reckoning).

**Klein**

An explanation concerning the reactions to examples such as Flintoff’s can be provided through the work of Klein (1952). From this perspective, the Flintoff scenario involves the confrontation of the ordinary realities of the human body (especially when that body is meant to be of a certain, highly developed form) forcing the psyche to face the illusion of omnipotence through the operation of splitting which occurs within the paranoid-schizoid position – an action taken in phantasy. Klein claims that her analytic observations with children showed that there is in the unconscious a fear of annihilation of life. She states,

‘I would also think that if we assume the existence of a death instinct, we must also assume that in the deepest layers of the mind there is a response to this instinct in the form of fear of annihilation of life. Thus in my view the danger arising from the inner working of the death instinct is the first cause of anxiety.’ (1952: 29)

She makes the assumption that the struggle between life and death instincts operate during birth and accentuates the persecutory anxiety aroused by this painful experience. These persecutory feelings from inner sources are intensified by painful external experiences, for from the earliest days onwards frustration and discomfort arouse in the infant the feeling of being attacked by hostile forces. Therefore this experience makes the external world, including the mother’s breast, appear hostile. To this contributes the fact that the ego turns destructive impulses against this primary object. The young
infant feels that frustration by the breast, implying a danger to life, is the retaliation for his destructive impulses towards it and the frustrating breast is persecuting him. So, the first form of anxiety is of a persecutory nature.

The infant also projects destructive impulses onto the breast, deflecting the death instinct outwards, and in this way the attacked breast becomes an external representative of the death instinct. This ‘bad’ breast is also introjected and this therefore intensifies the internal danger situation – the fear of the activity of the death instinct within. The introjection of the bad breast, therefore involves the introjection of the portion of the death instinct which had been deflected outwards and the ego attaches its fear of its own destructive impulses to the internal bad object.

‘To summarise: the frustrating (bad) external breast becomes, owing to projection, the external representative of the death instinct; through introjection it reinforces the primary internal danger-situation; this leads to an increased urge on the part of the go to deflect (project) internal dangers (primarily the activity of the death instinct) into the external world.’ (Klein, 1952: 31)

The outcome of this process is a constant fluctuation between the fear of internal and external bad objects – between the death instinct operating within and deflected outwards. But this activity of the death instinct deflected outwards as well as its working internally cannot be considered apart from the simultaneous operation of the activity of the life instinct. This attaches itself to the external object, the gratifying, (good) breast, which becomes the external representative of the life instinct. The introjection of this good object reinforces the power of the life instinct within. This good internalised breast, which is felt to be the source of life, forms a vital part of the ego and its preservation becomes an imperative need. Therefore, the introjection of this first loved object is inextricably linked with all the processes engendered by the life instinct. The good internalised breast and the bad devouring breast form the core of the super ego in its good and bad aspects; they are the representatives within the ego of the struggle between the life and death instincts. Klein termed this the paranoid-schizoid position.

But, as Klein notes, from the beginning of life, the ego tends towards integrating itself and towards synthesising different aspects of the object – an expression of the life instinct. Ultimately these processes of integration become more frequent and lasting as development goes on and in such states, a measure of synthesis between love and hatred in relation to these part-objects comes about. This gives rise to depressive anxiety, guilt and the desire to make reparation to the injured loved object. Within the depressive position the infant perceives and introjects the mother increasingly as a complete person, implying a fuller identification and more stable relationship with her. Whilst the focus here is predominately on the mother at this point, the infant’s relation to the father and others people within its environment also undergo a similar change. Thus, the splitting processes diminish in strength and are predominately related to whole objects, as opposed to the part objects of the paranoid-schizoid position.

What facilitates this process of integration is:

‘the individual’s feeling that integration implies being alive, loving and being loved by the internal and good object; that is to say, there exists a close link between integration and object relations.’ (Klein, 1952: 312)

The work of Winnicott (1971) gives further insight as to the environment needed for the integration mentioned by Klein to take place.

‘A facilitating environment must have a human quality, not a mechanical perfection, so the phrase ‘good-enough mother’ seems to me to meet the need for a description of what the child needs if the inherited growth processes are to become actual in the development of the individual child.’ (Winnicott, 1986: 144)
This is accompanied by holding – both physically and psychically:

‘You will see that a great deal that a mother does with an infant could be called ‘holding’. Not only is actually holding very important, and a delicate matter that can only be delicately done by the right people, but also much of infant nurture is an ever-widening interpretation of the word ‘holding’. Holding comes to include all physical management, in so far as it is done in adaptation to an infant’s needs.

(Winnicott, 1986: 107)

It is this process of holding that is key to the facilitation of the movement of the infant from the paranoid-schizoid position where splitting, projection, introjection and projective identification occur to that of the depressive position where the infant can integrate its objects, which take on both good and bad aspects, cope with the guilt generated by the paranoid-schizoid position and endeavour to make amends.

But, returning to Klein’s arguments concerning the struggle between the life and death instincts, given that this struggle persists throughout life then this source of anxiety is never eliminated and enters as a perpetual factor in all anxiety-situations. Therefore, there is always the possibility (indeed the actuality) that stakeholders in a sports performance will split key performers into highly idealised and highly vilified parts – accompanied by projection and introjection: they will return to the paranoid-schizoid position. They are therefore the recipients of our split-off parts with the boundary between self and other always being denied. Therefore, when faced with ‘failure’ such as Flintoff’s, the vilification or concern is exacerbated because these people will have been an item of attachment by those who perceive them as a powerful, idealised, and important other.

Implications

Application of this type of theorisation to the sports milieu provides interesting insights. It could be argued that more considered, balanced and thoughtful journalism might be symptomatic of the depressive position, capable of integrating potentially diverse, opposing arguments and views. However, it is arguably not in the interests of those who live by sports and the revenues they bring, to do so consistently because they have a high degree of reliance on tabloid presentational formats that operate very differently and gain their audiences as a result of utilising highly polarised arguments more redolent of the paranoid-schizoid position. More significantly, integration allows us to experience disappointment: to acknowledge that Andy Flintoff is probably not the successor to Ian Botham but a gifted all-rounder in his own right and that Botham himself was and continues to be an intriguing and quixotic figure – but with a talent that is possibly only rarely experienced within any sport and whose blossoming came within a vital tournament, the Ashes series against Australia that heightened his iconic status. Or, more positively, that Flintoff’s career trajectory and successes will be inevitably different, but possibly no less exciting.

For those involved in the training, development and management of sportspeople, part of the work they are engaged should involve awareness as to what lies behind the journalism that their trainees can be subjected to. This dovetails with the strong insider/outsider perspective that already operates within professional sports. As I have stated elsewhere (Gilmore, 2001) the ‘inside’ consists of an enclosed space frequented by those who are directly involved in playing as is populated by players, their coaches and managers. This ‘inside’ space can have resonance with the concept of shadow systems, (Stacey, 1996) with the formal structures of the game and the club – the non-playing side that is not directly involved in performance – being defined as the ‘outside’, or the legitimate system. Key figures like coaches and managers can play a mediating role, shuttling between the inside and the outside – usually with the objective of protecting and bettering the lot of those operating ‘inside’. Therefore, accounts such as this would work to cement the dynamics of the ‘inside’ whilst simultaneously being used to mollify and offer explanations to key ‘outsiders’ as to the rationale for
events occurring within it. Thus maintaining control in an environment that can be increasingly exposed to media scrutiny and stakeholder pressures.

Alternatively, we can become comfortable with disappointment: ‘I have been cold and bored and unhappy for so long that when Arsenal are good, I feel slightly but unmistakably disoriented…’ (Hornby, 1992: 245), so that when success is experienced (that of the team or that of the significant individual), the splitting process also occurs because the situation is also suffused with anxiety of the kind Hornby outlines. More importantly, the integration on the insider/outside perspective might enable corporations to adopt more realistic role modelling that enables their employees to avoid the dialectics on the one hand, of their own failure to perform at peak levels, while cynically assessing the potential collapse of legitimacy when adopted icons themselves fall short of the high expectations placed upon them.

Utilising Lasch again, it could be argued that we fear death and old age and that whilst we have always feared death to some extent, this fear is heightened in societies where the space occupied by religion and the sacred has shrunk, and we are more interested in prizing youth and the future rather than in posterity. Like bodies, organisations can also decline and decay or experience a form of death through downsizing, redundancy, restructuring and that in situations where such change is forecast or ongoing, people will experience heightened anxiety and a return to the psychological processes outlined previously.

It could also be argued that many make a similar investment in organisations as they do in the body: with processes like continuous professional development (CPD) being presented within the personnel/HR literature as a bulwark against uncertainty within the employment market and offering the hope that should we persist in such activities, we would be less open to such vagaries (at worst) or, more positively, gain leverage through the acquisition of skills and expertise. This could be seen as a means of keeping ourselves young and attractive through identification with that part of an employer representing the ego ideal of the good mother – it keeps us omnipotent. Therefore, those within an organisation who criticise the employing organisation, or such processes as CPD within the HR community are more likely to conform to the cathexed bad mother. Even if the critic is proved right, then whilst we should expect the critic to be vindicated and rehabilitated, there is something in the denial of the ego ideal (good mother) that is unforgivable.

Ultimately we need to be able to experience disappointment that we might not achieve all we seek; that the investments we make, be it in the body or our careers for example, might not yield the results we hope and that normal human misery is an essential part of experiencing life in its diversity. Thus, any improvement in Flintoff’s form is made the more pleasurable because it carries with it the story of a struggle against physical injury and personal attack. Whilst he might need to put his shirt on because his physique will never conform to a marketer’s idea[4], his performances (and those of the new generation of ODI and test players) are attracting spectators to games – some of whom might be new converts destined to experience the gamut of emotions generated by the shifts and surges in play that test and one day cricket provides so powerfully. Enjoy the anxiety.

Endnotes

[1] Michael Jordan, the iconic, hugely individually successful Chicago Bulls basketball player

[2] An interesting – albeit double-edged corporate parallel could of course be made here; one which stressed greater consideration for the holistic physical and psychological needs of employees. Arguably, the surveillance and performance measurements are often in place anyway…

[3] A term coined to refer to players within the sport who can bat and bowl to a very high standard – these are very rare and very prized personnel, especially at international level.
Ironically Flintoff’s size and strength is now being utilised by Channel 4’s advertising campaign for the test series between England and the West Indies.
References


Young, I. M. (1990) Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press.