

From bodies as ‘meat’ to bodies as ‘flesh’: The expression of performance management as ‘sacrificial acts’ within professional rugby.

Abstract: In this article we argue that to extend the research on performance management we need to examine further how organisational members interweave the technology of such management into their work. Using Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, we question the notion that technology acts on bodies in a linear manner as ‘meat’ to be manipulated. His reversible ontology suggests that these materials can be woven into the flesh of organising in a multitude of ways. Specifically, we refer to professional rugby, and the manner in which its players utilise the technology of performance management, to forge a localised expression of sacrifice. We suggest that this expression provides a means for players to define and evaluate themselves against ‘good rugby’. As forms of evaluation may vary in organisations, we recommend that researchers do not solely associate performance management with metrics but also look to other, more localised, expressions to inform their work.

Keywords: phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty, embodiment, performance management, corporeal, rugby

Introduction

No one person is bigger than the club...for a team to be successful, you need everyone's ideals to be on the same wavelength and everyone working towards a certain goal. As soon as one person starts to act outside of that and be really selfish, that's when the whole starts to tear. Other people start to be like, ‘Well, fuck, if he's not going to do that, then why the fuck should I bother?’ And then the whole thing falls down (Earl, rugby player at Hibernia).¹

¹ All names are pseudonyms

Within professional club rugby even though fifteen players take the field, there is a requirement for all fifty plus members of a squad to be committed across the season owing to injuries, deselection, international duties and personal obligations. As Earl reflects, if there is no consistent individual commitment, a vulnerable ‘tear’ exists in the fabric of the team, hampering their ability to compete. Like many organisations, professional rugby teams rely heavily on performance management practices in order to avoid such tears. These practices may involve: statistical packages analysing the number of tackles each player puts in; wearing devices that measure the metres a winger covers in training; or equipment that records a hooker’s ability to exert force in a scrum. Many of these practices are infused with material technology of some form. Sporting bodies, in contrast to such mechanical measurement practices, are viewed as less reliable owing to their ‘Jekyll-and-Hyde duplexity’ (Turner 2008, 25), both venerated for their mouldable potential and denounced as docile instruments pressed to serve organisational aims (Hoberman 1992; Wacquant 2002; Shilling 2005). Within rugby, performance management is often brought to bear on players’ bodies by coaches and support staff, through technology, as a way to exercise control over such duplicitous bodies, and thus competitive games (Magdalinski 2008; Levy 2015). However, the deployment of these techniques may be costly whether in relation to athletes’ mental health (Rice et al. 2016; Roderick et al. 2017), stifling internal innovation in favour of industrial ‘fads’ (Henriksen et al. 2010; Houlihan and Chapman 2015) or the unethical dismissal of young academy players whose on field performances are deemed substandard compared to generalised sporting metrics (Relvas et al. 2010; Coupland 2015). Examining the implications of the deployment of such techniques on sportspeople has been an important endeavour in previous research.

In this article however, we wish to extend the research on sporting performance management not by focusing on such causal implications, but by exploring how the technology of such management is expressed situationally, via an ontological re-conception of the ‘body’, to inform what is locally presented as 'good' work. It is our ambition to comprehend performance management as therefore

enacted through ‘flesh and blood’, coming into being in a unique way within rugby (Stoller 1997). In order to do so, rather than seeing bodies as dualistically positioned as a ‘mechanism of social control and as a form of self-expression and empowerment’ (Haynes 2008, 328), we embrace the notion that ‘we are the practices’ (Dreyfus 1991). Our bodies are not simply ‘worked on’ by performance management techniques, nor do they only respond through resistance (Costas et al. 2016; Rajan-Rankin 2018). We wish therefore to extend the literature on performance management to explore how the materiality involved in such techniques is appropriated by rugby players’ bodies to express something that carries enhanced meaning, specifically the expression of sacrifice or a ‘sacrificial act’. To quote Earl, our aim is to explore how the materiality of performance management helps to get players ‘on the same wavelength’ and thereby ensure their commitment to the team’s goal across the season.

We embed the paper in sociological research that focuses on corporeality, in particular that which utilises the ‘fleshy’ ontology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty 1968; Crossley 1995; Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2009). Specifically, we draw on his notion of ‘le schéma corporel’, an anti-dualistic rejection of divisible bodies working on things (materiality) or things working on bodies. Bodies are not then passive ‘meat’ to be worked on by the technology of performance management, but are ‘always already’ interwoven within the wider reversible organisational ‘flesh’ of practice (Merleau-Ponty 2007a, 55). Merleau-Ponty’s strength is the ability to illuminate such practice in its ‘brute’, rather than idealised, state. He declares ‘we live in the midst of man-made objects, among tools, in houses, streets, cities and most of the time we see them only through the human actions which put them to use. We have become used to thinking that all of this exists necessarily and unshakeably’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 16). His work therefore provides a methodological lens to comprehend the world, prompting us ‘to think in new ways about the nature of matter and the matter of nature’, by challenging the taken-for-granted assumption that bodies and

materiality exist as distinct forms in organisational life (Coole and Frost 2010, 6; Van Maanen 2017, 811).

In order to explore Merleau-Ponty's fleshy reflections, we draw on empirical material from an ethnography of a professional rugby club in the United Kingdom called 'Hibernia' (pseudonym). The article analyses the relations the male players had with the materiality of the performance management approach deployed by the staff and coaches. Throughout, we build a picture of their engagement with such materiality, particularly how they re-forged their experiences through a communal expression of sacrifice. We argue in our discussion that the bodies involved do not sit in dualistic opposition to the materiality of performance management, but in practice they draw on each other in a 'reversible' manner to allow new meanings of 'good' rugby work to be expressed communally (Merleau-Ponty 1968). The discussion illustrates that such materiality is not a causal mechanism for performance management ideals but rather acts as a 'pregnant' potential for various forms of lived meaning to be enacted (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 125). We conclude by arguing that Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'flesh' is useful because it allows us to understand how new forms of expression emerge that generate a more resonant 'lived meaning' for those involved.

From bodies as meat to bodies as flesh

In detailing the body as 'meat' we look to establish ourselves overtly within the sociology of the body literature (e.g. Shilling 1993; Williams and Bendelow 1998; Hoffman and Fine 2005; Wacquant 2005; Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2007). Much of this literature has sought to grapple with the 'problem of the body' (Williams and Bendelow 1998, 10) which dualistically positions the body as both an organic, internal entity and a wider conceptual symbol of how society organises itself pragmatically and morally (Waldenfels 2004). This obstacle ensures that the body is left unsatisfactorily represented as a singular entity or some esoteric collective (Turner 2008, 25). In response to this representational problem, 'a bewildering array of sociologies of the body' has

emerged since the 1990s (Shilling 1993; Vannini et al. 2011, 2; DeMello 2014). Casey (2000, 53) points out however that there can be ‘not much bodiliness’ to some of these studies, as they are ‘acutely abstracted and disassociated from lived embodied experience’. Specifically, therefore, we position ourselves within a ‘carnal sociology of the body’ which aims not simply to explore what is done to the body’ but also ‘what the body does’ (Crossley 1995, 43-44; Williams and Bendelow 1998, 65). The focus therefore is not simply how bodies are ‘inscribed’ upon by organisations but how these bodies come to contribute in a meaningful way to communal experiences.

In looking to grasp such experiences, however, the ‘problem of the body’ still remains, for it represents our bodies through a bounded epistemological view. Through this vista the body is summarised as ‘ending at the skin’, creating a ‘bounded’ schism between what happens inside us and outside in the world (Haraway 1991; Burkitt 2000; Dreyfus and Taylor 2015). This ‘hardening’ of the skin between insides and outsides is an example of an epistemological dualism. We can understand such dualisms as two ‘mutually exhaustive substances’, a by-product that is the result of realist ontology’s desires to break ongoing life down into discrete variables to extract cause and effect (Grosz 1994, 6; Lincoln and Guba 2000, 174). In creating such philosophical boundaries, our bodies are also extracted from their daily experiences, suggesting that how we are called to move in the world is based on some internal ‘spark plug’ or external mechanical stimulus (Todes 2001). An implication of such a bounded epistemology is that bodies become represented as nothing more than ‘meat machines’ with the underlying assumption that no essential difference exists between how our bodies operate in comparison to mechanisation (Dreyfus 1993). The body is thus represented as an independent part, reduced to its meaty physicality rather than inextricably knotted into the fabric of daily life.

Semantically, the term ‘body’ itself contributes to this reductive representation of a mechanical part or meat. Etymologically, the term is from the Saxon ‘bodig’, meaning ‘vessel’, suggesting it to be

some form of carrier, either of a transcendental soul or a rational mind (Fraser and Greco 2005). The word 'body' therefore reinforces the view that it is a container housing some deeper essence. Even the term 'embodiment' is suggestive of something on the inside that is separate from a world on the outside through its use of the prefix 'em' (Küpers 2015). Sheets-Johnstone (2016, 192) argues that 'embodiment' is used as a 'freely-applied lexical band aid' that reduces 'living corporeal reality' down to a contained body apart from the world. Terminology therefore is lacking that gets away from notions of containment. Coupled with this semantic confusion, there is a reoccurring 'somatophobia', or fear, that the body is a threat to the 'operation of reason', limiting our soul and subsequently our 'mind' from some transcendental idealism (Grosz 1994, 5). The body here is feared as something 'savage' or 'primitive' (Howes 2006, 5). Through a bodily bounded view we are reduced to mechanised, meaty 'shells', a part of the unruly materiality on the 'outside' that obfuscates the 'pearl' that is rationality on the 'inside' (Burkitt 2000, 1). It is unsurprising that in order to bring 'control' to such a 'brute' body we have developed a number of various disciplining approaches.

One such approach, performance management, is predicated on the body as a bounded, distinct entity in need of worldly regulation. We define performance management as the search for control through the abstraction and rationalisation of knowledge (Levy 2015, 161). Usually this form of knowledge is constructed through an external technique or equipment that looks to act on our internal motivations, desires and so forth in a causal, predictive manner (Barley 1986, 80). Specifically through such forms of surveillance, control is enacted so management can monitor, record and also track employee behaviours (Ball 2010). Of course, monitoring is not new, with traditional forms relating to direct observation, epitomised by the Hawthorne studies, that focuses specifically on the 'inconstant presence of a human observer' (Lupton 1963; Stanton 2000, 129). Certainly performance sport itself is based on such monitoring, in which the 'eye' of the coach provides dedicated observation and feedback to enhance athletic ability (Walton 1992). The relative recent addition within the workplace however is 'electronic' monitoring which has expanded further as technology

grows ever smaller and cheaper to implement (Moore and Piwek, 2017; Moore, 2018). This technology has extended the 'reach' of performance management increasing the scrutiny of all employees (Sewell and Wilkinson 1992, 280; Sewell 1998, 397). Ball (2010) argues that within many workplaces employees are not against such scrutiny if it provides appropriate, practical feedback. It runs into trouble however when it goes beyond what is reasonable for example when exact information is sought on how employees use their time or when the techniques involved compromise existing levels of autonomy and trust.

Within sport, the idea of measuring performance through the use of technology has grown substantially with the increase in professionalisation and national funding, particularly within the United Kingdom (Magdalinski 2008; Relvas et al. 2010; Houlihan and Chapman 2015). This increase has demanded both a greater justification for funding and/or sustained competitive improvement, with both driving the extensive use of monitoring technology. This drive is referred to as a 'mania for measurement' which has led to a 'cult-like hardening approach to accountability, measurement and quantification' (Roderick et al. 2017, 102; also see Hoberman 1992;). This monitoring is deployed under the assumption that the correct technological manipulation of the body can result in limitless athletic performances (Hoberman 1992, Shilling 2005). There is a causal assumption inherent within such thinking that technology can work on our bodies as if they are docile and accepting of its effects. This assumption brings us back to the 'problem' of the body, specifically the bounded view of the body as set apart from the world. Through this representation, it is either shown as acting on the world, or being acted upon, for example by the monitoring technology in sports domains. Organisational research has shown however that bodies resist such manipulation by escape (Costas et al. 2016), forms of collusion (Casey 1995) or the perceived control achieved by selling one's body (Scheper-Hughes 2002). It thus demonstrates, in other industrial settings at least, that bodies are far from being docile.

In this paper, we wish to build on the existing organisational research on performance management by questioning the bounded causality that performance management operates within. Specifically, we are interested in how the technology of performance management is interwoven by the bodies involved into existing, localised expressions of meaning. In order to do so, we turn to Maurice Merleau-Ponty whose ‘bête noire’ was epistemological dualisms either of mind/body (Merleau-Ponty 1962) or body/world (Merleau-Ponty 1968; Carman 2008, 11). Although Merleau-Ponty’s anti-dualistic, ‘carnal’ approach is increasingly used in the sociology of the body, he appears only sporadically within organisational studies (for exceptions see Lennie 2000; Dale and Latham 2015; Küpers 2015). Yet, he offers us an ontology of the ‘flesh’, a homonym pertaining both to the flesh of our bodies but also the ‘flesh’ of the world, the ‘pulp’ of which we are all part (Merleau-Ponty 1968). This pulp is made up of a daily array of bodies and objects (what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘things’) as well as the physical spaces we inhabit.

Merleau-Ponty argues that what is unique here is that such ‘pulp’ or fleshy arrangement is not dualistically opposed but exists in a reversible ‘chiasmatic’ manner. The term chiasma is borrowed from the crossing point between chromosomes in genetics or the criss-cross of the optic nerve to enable vision. In essence, it is the crossing point itself that helps construct the associated ‘parts’ (Coole 2007, 12). It is comparable to Grosz’s (1994, xii) notion of the Möbius strip which, through a rejection of dualistic ‘mechanical’ metaphors, suggests our everyday activities becomes expressed ‘through a twisting or inversion’ of body and world. Merleau-Ponty similarly stressed that ‘it is not just the unidirectional relation of the one who perceives to what he perceives’ but that the relationship is constantly ‘reversed’ with body and world co-constructing each other through their very intersection (1964b, 166). Our bodies therefore are both sentient and sensible in terms of how we touch and are touched, see and are seen, hear and are heard and so forth (Crossley 1995, 44).

A fleshy ontology suggests that any form of expression emanates from the body's unique position in relation to the world (Landes 2013a, 73). Merleau-Ponty (2007b, 376) uses painting to illustrate this point, suggesting that expression does not result from the painter's causal actions in a mechanical manner, but rather how body, materials and place overlap in unique ways to produce new forms of art. In the research with Hibernia, we wish to demonstrate that the technology associated with performance management, or the bodies involved, do not act on each in a causal manner. Instead, the players draw on such technology in order to enhance a 'lived meaning' for themselves through the expression of sacrifice (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 42). The term 'expression' refers to how we act out our 'meaning' through daily action, rather than simply reducing it to something verbal or an external event. Specifically, meaning is not locked into some cognition or emotional state 'inside' us but is brought into being by our situated actions in the world. Wacquant (1998, 339) states that, in boxing, sacrifice is 'the name of the game' because it attempts to 'restructure and regularise conduct' for the individual boxer. We are not suggesting that sacrifice works differently in Hibernia, but rather how it comes to be formed locally or 'incarnated' in daily work can vary considerably depending on the context (Wacquant 2005, 453). Within the rugby team this involved technology being put to work in more meaningful ways than the comparative ranking of statistics. In the empirical section we intertwine the Merleau-Pontian concept of 'le schéma corporeal', which explicitly looks at our 'bodily point of view' in terms of its relations with people and objects (Merleau-Ponty 1964b; Carman 2008). This concept illustrates that technology and bodies are reversible, informing each other through the ongoing practice of rugby. It will enable us to illustrate the incarnation of sacrifice through performance management technology.

Methods

The link between sport and organisation is one of growing interest (Numerato and Baglioni 2012; Vermeulen et al. 2016; Wood 2016). Recent research has explored sportspeople as precarious workers (Gilmore et al. 2017; Roderick and Schumacker 2017) or role models (Dunn 2015). Other researchers

have examined corporate developments in sport, with papers on hiring practices (Desai et al. 2018), governance (Numerato and Baglioni 2012) and responses to its commercialisation and commodification (Hill et al. 2016; Torchia 2016; Wood 2016). A third strand of research has analysed sport from a Foucauldian perspective, examining power and control in sporting contexts. For example, Manley et al. (2016) examine the role of disciplinary mechanisms in silencing dissenting employees, while Dortants and Knoppers (2016) use governmentality to examine diversity and women's participation in sport.

Rugby² provides an excellent accompaniment to this interest, for its physical intensity, growing commodification, and team-driven nature provide a robust context to explore how such elements reciprocally inform each other (Cunliffe and Coupland 2011; Coupland 2015). Rugby also specifically provides an intriguing context for exploring the impact of performance management technology owing to the sport only turning professional in 1995 (Houlihan and Chapman 2015). In doing so, it has embraced such technology to justify the worth of players so as to allocate tight budgets according to various contractual demands (O'Brien and Slack 2004; Obel 2010). Such technology therefore was highly interwoven into the organisational life of rugby at an early professional stage. To pursue our aims we draw upon a study of a men's professional rugby team, based in the United Kingdom, which we refer to under the pseudonym of 'Hibernia'. This team consists of 53 nationally diverse, male players from the UK, Canada, South Africa, and New Zealand, to name a few. In addition to the players, there are also 31 non-playing staff who include a Performance Support Team of coaches, strength and conditioning leads, physiotherapists, and performance analysts, as well as a Commercial Operations Team who focus on marketing, sponsorship and so forth.

² For an explanation of rugby terms and positions, the World Rugby website offers a comprehensive beginners guide. See: <http://passport.worldrugby.org/index.php?page=beginners&p=1> (last accessed 30 January 2019).

The study was conducted by the first author, Will, who took on the role of participant observer during a 10 month ethnography (Smith 2001; Van Maanen 2011a), spending three days per week at the club during that period. The research formed part of a larger research study into leadership at the club. However, as we engaged with a thematic analysis of the field notes and interviews from this larger study, performance management presented itself as a unique theme – and a set of practices – through which those involved with the team understood and expressed their participation in the context (Hoepfl 1997; Sparkes and Smith 2014; Denzin 2017).

Access to Hibernia was obtained through links Will had made through sport psychology, with permission granted once formal gatekeepers (including the Head Coach) had met Will and Peter and negotiated the form of engagement and consent involved (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Obtaining consent is a difficult process in ethnography owing to the number of individuals involved and the varying nature of what is ‘on’ and ‘off the record’ (Thorne 1980, 290; Watson 2011). For this reason, consent was sought from those interviewed, alongside the application of pseudonyms of all involved and sufficient ‘masking’ to ensure the team, and its location, could not be identified through the field notes (Wax 1980; Brannan et al. 2007). Permission was also granted to take and use anonymised photographs.

The research presented here is close to what Van Maanen (2011a, 101) calls an ‘impressionist tale’. Rather than ethnographic realism which suggests an external, objective ‘truth’, such tales are from a personal perspective, selecting pieces of ethnographic experiences that were particularly striking so as to elaborate on the topic (Marcus and Cushman 1982; Stoller 1984). Specifically it embraces Geertz’s (1973) notion of thick description which refers to an interpretative approach that seeks to explain the context of an event as well as the behaviours of those involved. It does not look therefore to do a study of the entire team, but rather locates the debate on performance management *within* the team’s daily experiences in order to evoke rich details of organisational life (Van Maanen 2011b).

We readily accept that this professional team sport organisation is not an everyday commercial organisation, and that ostensibly it is a very masculine environment in which frailty is discouraged (Cunliffe and Coupland 2011). It does, however, provide an unusual and apposite case study to explore how those involved utilise the technology of performance management to inform their more meaningful expression of sacrifice (Wacquant 1995).

Hibernia Rugby: Performance management as part of the flesh

The first set of field notes³ are taken from an early observation of the rugby players going through their paces on a ‘testing day’. Such days act as a marker for the players’ physical condition and areas for improvement. Certainly bodies could appear to be ‘docile’ and worked on here, as they are subjected to 6 rounds of tests that are heavily delineated to measure their sprint speed, exercise intensity, jump strength and so forth:

On arriving at the club, I went inside to the indoor track area where Robbie, the assistant Strength & Conditioning coach was helping out with a ‘testing day’, a three monthly occurrence to see how the players were improving or not as the case may be. Robbie was standing beside a large numerical display. Next to him on the sprint track was a set of two infra-red ‘gates’ with another set positioned about 5 metres down the track. The aim was simple. The players had to push the ‘proowler’ (what looks like an upturned table with 80kg of weight on it - see Figure 1) through the two sets of gates as fast as they could. I went and stood next to Robbie, who had another device called a ‘micro-timer’ in front of him that was connected to the gates. About 8 players were doing this, with a best of three rounds. At the end of the rounds, Robbie would circle the best score for each player. This was tough - the best runs had to have a fairly powerful start and straight approach (some came close to hitting the gates!) – and a good time was around 2.84 seconds. Yet, it seemed the players revelled in

³ Please note the ‘I’ in the field notes refers to Will’s (first author) experiences within the ethnography.

the challenge, often jokingly goading each other and celebrating exaggeratedly when they came top of the numerical charts. I turned to Robbie and asked what was desirable here, as in terms of technique. He agreed a flat back was good to replicate the game but some of the other strength and conditioning coaches seemed to differ on this 'specificity'. Robbie wanted as close to game technique as possible, while others simply wanted to see aggression and intensity. Either way then, I wondered why the numbers were so important. After every player's turn the score flashed up on the large display to either comedic groans or congratulatory backslapping. It nearly came across more as a 'bit of light relief'.

[Figure 1 about here. Centred. Title of: The 'proowler' used during the testing]

It may be suggested that in these instances the players' bodies are 'docile' because they had little control over what tests were selected and were asked to complete the tasks in a mechanistic fashion. As players then they are potentially reduced to bodies in an objectified manner, and evaluated solely against their productive, meaty output. Yet for all the focus on numbers to shape and discipline, the players seemly enjoyed the testing for its cohesive element as much as how competition was incentivised through the use of numbers (Dreyfus 2014). Indeed, there is concern, even with staff, that such testing and statistics may not be as causal as one might assume, rather deemed *necessary* as an industrial practice in addition to any productive contribution. Robbie himself highlights this in relation to the GPS devices ('pods') placed in the back of players' jerseys during training and games, as depicted in the photographs below, figures 2 and 3.

[Figure 2 (Title of: An individual 'pod') and 3 (Title of: The 'pods' during storage) about here. Ideally side by side]

As the session came to a close I stood with Robbie as he collected the pods from the players - we had chatted about the use of technology and he had remarked it could hamper as well as enable. I asked why? 'It muddies the water' he responded and began to list the reasons why.

First, its cost - each pod costs £2700 and you need to ask whether this is worth it for the job at hand. Second, they produce 2000 variables but yet rugby clubs often get interns to do the monitoring - Robbie felt the interns just were not trained enough to maximise the pods. Specifically, I asked had the practices become institutionalised? He nodded strongly! He went on to say that many clubs did it because English rugby do it, or New Zealand do it, but many clubs are not sure *why* they were doing it. Third, taking out the pods and entering the details onto the system was very time consuming. Finally, he wondered if it was fit for purpose - in that sense it was designed for running based team sports like soccer and hockey to reflect 'work' but work in rugby with its contact and tactical aspect was very different. There was gyroscopes and other bits and pieces in them but [they were] not utilised to the max. When I suggested to Robbie I was interested in how objects can lead, he suggested that the 'pods' can certainly 'drag' you in particular directions that were not always useful.

The material form of performance management here, represented through the use of the 'pods', illustrates that such surveillance, like the testing, does not act on the bodies of the players in a causal format. Instead, their impact can be rather uncertain, with Robbie reflecting they can 'drag you' in unexpected directions. This uncertain nature of objects in relation to our bodies allows us to look further at Merleau-Ponty's 'le schéma corporel' (Carman 2008) or 'bodily point of view', best captured in the French pronoun of 'On' ('We' or 'One') as in 'One blinks every few seconds' or 'We breathe through our noses' (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 176; Carman 2008). In particular then, it looks at how 'we', in terms of the physicality of our bodies, engage with common objects around us. Through the schema, Merleau-Ponty re-conceives how we view objects, or 'things'. We do not simply see or use an object but rather 'inhabit it' or as he says 'since things and my body are made of the same stuff, it is necessary that my body's vision be made somehow in the things' (Merleau-Ponty 2007b, 355). Merleau-Ponty (1962, 140) uses the example of the 'blind man's cane' to illustrate the 'coiling over' of body and object:

The blind man's cane has ceased to be an object for him, it is no longer perceived for itself; rather, the cane's furthest point is transformed into a sensitive zone, it increases the scope and the radius of the act of touching and has become analogous to a gaze.

The blind man is not being led by the cane, but rather through the unique expression that occurs between man and cane, it fulfils a *newly* formed role of guidance. Similarly, Robbie points out that the 'pods' do not really direct the players in any way, but through their deployment in the back of their jerseys articulate a plethora of 'possible' meanings. For example, their deployment may be conducted to ensure the staff feel they have some indicators of performance to enable a sense of control, or simply the measurement acts as a displacement activity to relieve the players of the monotony of training. The uncertainty around how numbers or objects impact on the production of performance was not just expressed by Robbie. Other support staff members were also well aware of how such abstraction impacted on performance on the pitch. For example field notes from a sit down with Gareth, the lead performance analyst, also suggests his concern that numbers were limited in terms of directing action for the players:

Gareth sighed and reflected that for all the great software available to him, he still needed to factor in the 'human element' as the players were 'not robots'. Rather the stats act as a guide not a bible. He remarked that, 'there is an old saying that statistics are like bikinis - what they reveal is suggestive but what they conceal is vital'. He continued 'you have to be aware of their limitations'. He also didn't want the statistics to be used as punishment for the players. The focus was more on autonomy and flexible working. He went into how a player could log into the online stats package and basically check out the minutes of all the times they were involved in a game. He used a player as an example showing how the footage isolated him if he wished. Also the players could get direct video feedback from the coaches with a voice

overview from training or games. 'It just saves time' he said, remarking that in the past players would have to come in to get a USB or on site computer. The technology had helped deal with the sheer amount of information that was now required of modern coaches and players. He felt it was beneficial that the players could now sit in a coffee shop off site on a Sunday, or with [their] team mates somewhere, and review the game at their leisure. The word he used was 'empower'. I reflected that it could be easy for such stats to become a 'bit 1984', an Orwellian process of keeping tabs on the players. He agreed on this reflection and remarked it was important not to use the statistics to 'rank' the players in a comparative fashion.

It seemed then that, even from the support staff's perspective, the idea that on field performance could be dictated 'by the numbers' was rather narrow. The question then for Will as he continued in the ethnography was how did the players view such statistics and were they also aware of the limitations involved in their usage? The first concern around Gareth's idea was in relation to that notion of 'empowerment' for the players to review their statistics and game in their own time. The following field note excerpt from a leadership group⁴ meeting illustrates some concern here:

Rik fed back that Fernando (one of the other players) was struggling with the having to go through the work at night. The other leaders agreed this issue was a growing concern and Barry, the captain, reflected 'yeah you are always on edge with it'. I enquired what the issue was here. Earl piped up and illustrated that they get emails to look at things at home, 'all this extra stuff' - the idea was they would have less meetings in 'here' but they were still having that and more reviews at home. 'Yeah it can be quite long when you include everything' Earl chimed in. All the players agreed it was an issue but seemed unsure what to do. Unfortunately time ran out in the session and we all began to depart towards a team meeting that was about

⁴ Within the team the 'leadership group' consisted of at least six experienced players who represented the wider playing cohort across a season. These leaders were selected by the players themselves before the season commenced.

to occur. As we walked, I spoke further with Barry who stated ‘yeah I don't have a problem per se with it, but the guys who like that clear distinction between the stadium and home are really unhappy with it’.

It was evident then that the players were well aware of the impact having to review such statistics could have on them professionally and personally. As the next excerpt highlights however, the idea of such performance management did not just erode work-life boundaries, but the leadership group had further concerns that statistics could actually be disadvantageous to players’ actions on the pitch. Again the six leaders were gathered in a meeting to discuss such statistics:

Barry piped up that he was still concerned about the numbers. He said the ‘kilometres ran’ stat was new to him, and that he hadn’t even used it on international duty. He argued that ‘it was numbers for numbers sake - just moving for the sake of the stats’. Craig agreed, suggesting rugby was not about moving but being smart with it, conserving energy when needed. He continued by stating he was worried that some players were nearly afraid to try things for fear of making a mistake. Some of the other leaders also felt this to be the case, with players starting to feel unnecessarily negative about their performance. Ru chipped in that it was important to try and highlight the stuff that was not measured. I paused here and asked ‘is it trying to get at the intangibles?’. Ru laughed and nodded that it was always about making the intangibles tangible! He continued by highlighting that many of the players would not voice their concerns over this, and the leaders would need to bridge that ‘gap’ to the coaches and staff. Adam added ‘the coaches won’t worry about the stats when you have won. That’s all that matters really’.

However, this concern around numbers continued further with the players during the season. It developed beyond simply the use of numbers in general to how certain actions were broken down

and measured. For example, what is deemed to be a ‘tackle’⁵ may come under a certain definition in rugby, but all players could bring their own ‘quirks’ to a prototypical tackle depending on their size, position or skill set. The generalised manner in which actions like a ‘tackle’ were defined created further problems on the field around abstract measurement. Returning to the leadership group, we see from this excerpt how the concern rumbled on:

Adam arrived [at] the meeting and slumped down next to me. He introjected that, although he felt he may not be the one to highlight this (he had accumulated four missed tackles in the game on Friday night), there was a real issue and frustration around what is defined as a tackle. The rest of the leaders nodded in agreement on this one. Earl added that players like Seb (a lightweight, creative, player) were very good at ‘holding up’ opposing players for other larger teammates to make the final tackle. However, such ‘holding up[s]’ was registered statistically as ‘missed tackles’ dragging down his number unfairly. Craig suggested again the numbers were driving players to be ‘mistake minded’, becoming hesitant and missing tackles. Back rower⁶ Calum agreed that they needed to get back to basics on it, an analogy or something to help frame what is, and what is not, a tackle for the players. Ru agreed and suggested they sit down with Gareth to discuss this further. He continued by stating that of course all players knew different ways to ‘work the stats’ (increase their scores to a more favourable [level]), laughing at one player in particular who was able to double his count with one tackle. Either way though, he continued by stating it was important that all tackles were counted as such and suggested that Calum sit down and speak with Gareth about coming up with a new system, to which Calum duly agreed.

⁵ The ‘tackle’ is defined as follows: ‘A tackle occurs when the ball carrier is held by one or more opponents and is brought to ground, i.e. has one or both knees on the ground, is sitting on the ground or is on top of another player who is on the ground.’ See: <http://passport.worldrugby.org/index.php?page=beginners&p=7> (last accessed 30 January 2019).

⁶ Again, an explanation of rugby field positions can be found here: <http://passport.worldrugby.org/index.php?page=beginners&p=10> (last accessed 30 January 2019)

The to and fro of the player leadership meetings highlights that the statistics do have their place, and indeed throughout the season the players often suggested how important they were to evaluate their own and others' work rate. Instead, what both the support staff and the playing leaders are suggesting is that such statistics are limiting, and need to be intertwined with others forms of localised understanding to give the players a better 'feel' for how they were doing both in training and competition. It was therefore important for the players to find some way to represent that which 'was not measured' as Ru called it. Performance management therefore was extended locally beyond numbers to encompass others forms of representation deemed to be important by the players. We begin to see the idea of sacrifice, or 'sacrificial acts' as the players generally called them, as another form of bodily expression that reflected performance for the team. For example, Gary, a seasoned player at the club, gives us some insight into how performance could be brought to life in 'tangible' ways beyond simply the use of 'numbers'.

I reckon the older you get the more of a losing battle you fight to stay fit. Sam (former captain), he made it to 34 and he will probably be one of the last players to make it to that age. Definitely. The amount of injuries there are, there are guys retiring all the time now. I reckon...I have a year and a half left. If I get another two years, make it to 31, I'll be like 'I have had a bloody good career!'. I'd say the average career now is less than ten years. Yeah. But hey, you do it...like you say you can't really rationalise it, you just do it because you love it. And when you think I am going to do something that completely fucks my body, and you are only going to do it for ten years, you wouldn't change it...you wouldn't change it for anything. I guess maybe that makes you sound a bit stupid!

Gary here freely acknowledges that the sport he plays professionally will 'fuck' his body physically. Such players are readily aware of the organisational forces in which they are enmeshed, and what these may do to their bodies, but despite this knowledge are still willing participants in such physical

practices. Such willingness is summed up as 'sacrifice' when Séan continues by talking about his team mate Calum:

I suppose sacrifice is a visual thing more than a verbal one but Calum, even when he is injured he gets up and tries to make tackles again. That is probably a good example for me...he did one and it was last season and he broke his thumb. And the bone was sticking out and he looked down and he thought somebody had bitten him and his tooth had come out in his hand but it was his bone sticking out. But he just thought it was somebody's tooth and he held his hand and got back in the line. And he got up...just stuff like that, bloody hell, that's very impressive.

Calum's near total sacrifice of his finger is valorised by Séan here. Yet, it is also valorised by the club, earning him a place on the 'Courage Board' which sits outside the main management office for the team. At one stage, as I walked by, I asked Paul, the Player Development Manager, what the board meant:

Paul said it was something that was introduced by the Head Coach James - it referred originally to the first picture of a royal marine and rugby player who came in to talk and how, after losing his legs, had switched to rowing in the Paralympics. The second picture was of a player who was injured for two seasons straight but kept going. Third in line was another in relation to a chap who played for them after returning from cancer. The fourth photograph was a player who had suffered with a constant terrible injury and the final one was in relation to Calum's protruding bone in his finger and how he went back into the game and did two more phases [A phase is the time a ball is in play between breakdowns i.e. when a tackle occurs and players compete for the ball].

Sacrifice and courage are powerful concepts for the Hibernia players with ‘putting your body on the line’ for your team mates is a highly valorised concept. However, the valorisation of sacrifice is not done simply through retold stories or courage boards, but performance management too is a means to express such sacrifice. Figure 4 shows a statistical output the coaches and players use to denote ‘work’.

[Figure 4 about here - Title of: Example of statistical output]

It is through such statistics that players know how many metres were run, passes made, off loads provided, but also tackles delivered [An offload is when a player holding the ball is tackled, but passes the ball to a team mate before the tackle is completed]. It is not simply the coaches or staff who use these stats to position others - the players do so as well. As Rik, one of the playing leaders, illustrates, nobody wants to be at the bottom of these stats reports. He reflects on another player’s lack of effort suggesting he is just:

Happy to be paid and be a professional rugby player, his is always the name on the bottom of those stats...I guarantee you every time you look at the bottom, he’ll be at the bottom! No one else! Even if I saw that I would be like “fuck! How embarrassing!” Embarrass me, that would make me like, ‘Shit’, I genuinely would come in the next day and be like “Shit, I wonder if any of the boys would bring it up?”, and if it happened again...but it doesn't even faze him I don't think.

Performance management statistics here are intertwined with the notion of dedicating your body to the cause just as much as stories or the courage board. In essence statistics and sacrifice become ‘strange bedfellows’, but they are not rejected or positioned in adversarial terms. Rather both statistics and ‘sacrifice’ are equally abstract concepts that players utilise and draw on to express their

performance. Both body and technology therefore are intercorporeally intertwined, formulated through a common flesh (Merleau-Ponty 1964a; Leder 1990). The use of such technology supports the players to express a shared physicality of sacrifice, not simply through some idealised or esoteric view. Such physicality therefore is not the idea of ‘thinking together’ as body-less minds working in tandem, for ‘there is no constituting of a mind for a mind, but of a man for a man’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 169). Instead, such physicality refers to bodies in situ creating ways of doing that hold particular affective and practical resonance to those involved. The performance management outputs therefore provide a common physical language for players to understand each other and denote what is acceptable and unacceptable amongst themselves as a playing cohort. However, how the players evaluate, or ‘manage’, such performance themselves goes beyond numerical comparison to encompass localised notions of sacrifice.

Discussion: The ‘reversibility’ of performance management

Within the empirical section we sought to illustrate that the technology of performance management was not simply accepted in a docile fashion, or rejected as intrusive surveillance. Instead, the players looked to ‘incarnate’ such technology into their own frame of meaning in order to facilitate the localised expression of sacrifice (Wacquant 2004; 2005). We argued that the players use such statistics to complement this corporeal expression, with the result that technology and sacrifice are ‘strange bedfellows’. Their complementary nature perhaps only seems strange if we view bodies and technology through a binary epistemological stance, only able to causally influence each other rather than co-mingle and allow various expressions to emerge (Serres 1985/2008). Within organisational practice at Hibernia we begin to see how these ‘strange’ bedfellows fused as a both/and rather than either/or endeavour (Kelso and Engestrøm 2006). The use of ‘thick descriptions’ proves appropriate here, as an immersive ethnography, conducted over a period of time, provided Will with a strong exposure to the ‘work’ of professional rugby (Geertz 1973; Van Maanen 2011b). Such empirical activity allowed him to get ‘within the thick of it’, perhaps more so than the ‘thin structures’ of

interviews in which the action is always experienced second hand (Lincoln 2010, 6; Shotter 2014, 593). Still, although being ‘within’ in this way may allow us to represent bodies and technology as complementary, it does not allow us to philosophically extricate how such a fusion is formed.

The reversible philosophy of Merleau-Ponty’s flesh may point to how such a blend comes to be expressed. We suggested in the introduction that his idea of reversibility is a mutual ‘calling’ process or ‘commerce’, that is both pre-representational as it does not require a ‘strategy’, and pre-reflexive as it does not run along some temporal causality (Merleau-Ponty 1962; 1968). It illustrates that the meaning we ascertain from any expression is a result of a chiasmic ‘double belongingness’, in which body and object permeate each other in order to ascertain a situated comprehension (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 136-137). There is no bounded schism therefore between the body that is sensing and the object being sensed: both exist through a Janus-like engagement (Küpers 2015). Any form of expression then, like the players’ notion of sacrifice, is not reducible to ‘matter, is not mind, is not substance’, but comes into being through a living, carnal, texture or ‘fabric’ that eschews any notion of boundaries (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 139). A reversible, unbounded body rebukes any notion that we can reduce the implications of performance management technology within sport to their predicative implications for ‘meaty’ bodies. The idea of bodies responding to such technology in a linear fashion is a ‘rationalist dream’, that turns to dust once it hits the messy, ongoing, practice of a professional rugby team (Dreyfus 1993, xi).

In utilising Merleau-Ponty’s notion of ‘le schéma corporel’, we aimed to illustrate that expression is not an individual enterprise but rather a communal activity (Merleau-Ponty 1964b; Carman 2008). The expression of sacrifice, or any other phenomenon, through a corporeal lens always involves a form of ‘gearing’ into, or ‘catching on’ to sensible performances that are equal parts pure repetition and pure creation, something old but also new (Waldenfels 2000; Landes 2013a; 2013b). It is through our bodies having this reversible nature towards the world that materiality provides the ‘pregnant’

potentiality for expression to come into being. For example, we see that such acts of sacrifice occur within a particular 'site of meaning' (Ingold 2011, 65), which at Hibernia was the competitive pitch. Merleau-Ponty (1967) points out through an analogy of football, of which he was more of a fan, that each 'manoeuvre' of the player's body modifies the field of play, which in turn modifies the player and so forth as the action 'unfolds'. The 'field' which we inhabit therefore cannot be separated from how expressions 'play out' (Connor 2011, 51). Furthermore the actual symbolic spilling of bodily fluids onto the field, as was the case with Calum's broken finger, further reinforces this interwoven nature (Seremetakis 1993). Similarly, the presence of other players adds an intercorporeal ethic to such sacrifice (Merleau-Ponty 1964b). The players looked for 'sacrificial acts' to inform the bodies of others, a 'felt solidarity' in terms of laying one's body on the line for your team mates (Mazis 2016, 125). Indeed the spilling of blood on the altar of the field, and sacrificing oneself for your brethren, are part of rugby's 'sensory biography' (Corbett 2006, 226). Rugby is born out of the muscular Christianity of martyrdom which infused the public school system in which it was created (Coupland 2015; Collins 2015).

The surprising element in our findings however was noticing how the technology of performance management was growing ever further into the tissue of such muscularity. Our surprise resonated with much of the existing literature which suggests the body is more 'porous' than we may think. For example, the sporting body is becoming increasingly mechanised as the 'technological tour de force' under the premise that the correct 'inputs' will lead to successful 'outcomes' in a linear manner (Sheets-Johnstone 2009, 19). But such success is not simply predicated on how mechanisation may monitor bodies, but actually begins to interpolate them in order to increase performance (Shilling 2005). Alongside heart rate monitors or pods attached to bodies, other methods pierce the skin like lactate testing, administered supplements, hypoxic training to recreate high altitude, or even on at a more morally questionable level, the use of illegal performance enhancing substances (Magdalinski 2008). Furthermore, these 'visions of techno-golems' are only 'strange' if we predicate our

assumptions on the existence of a 'natural' body (Parker 2000, 74). Haraway (1991, 150) points out that it may be more fitting to embrace the notion that 'cyborg is our ontology'. She argues that such 'cyborgs' are a 'cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as fiction' (Haraway 1991, 149). She continues by arguing the 'boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion', and that meat and machine were always more fused than we led ourselves to believe. For this reason, Parker (2000, p. 81) coined the term 'cyborgization', in which 'we are already cyborgs' in our work through a 'continually shifting set of relationships' via moving human and non-human parts. It should then perhaps have come as less of a surprise that rugby players, like all other workers - particularly in sport, are becoming such 'cyborgs'.

This interwoven technological tissue that runs through the musculature of sacrifice, does however allow us to contribute to the literature on performance management in sport in two ways. First it looks to extend the idea that performance management technology is simply a form of surveillance or control of those involved (Sewell 1998; Manley et al. 2016). Certainly, the players remarked that they were 'struggling' with the intrusive nature of such surveillance. In addition, it could also be suggested that control was being regulated through the 'gaze' of management, like the work of Gareth (Sewell and Wilkinson 1992). Both interpretations of such technology may be fair, but in themselves add nothing new. The contribution here entails how the players embrace such technology to inform their *own* meaning around sacrifice. They are, therefore, not disciplined into such sacrificial acts, but willingly contribute to its expression, even if this means it may 'fuck' their bodies. Such willingness is not formed through collective coerced surveillance (see Knights and McCabe 2003 for example), but how the technology comes to be locally incarnated into more emotionally potent gestures that define what is meant by 'good rugby'. As Séan points out, rugby players' careers are shortening. This curtailment, along with the precarious financial nature of sports work, ensures such localised meanings grow increasingly important (Roderick 2006). Performance management technology

therefore helps facilitate the narrative that ‘sacrifice’ is something ‘they must do’ (Coupland 2015, 14), providing a sense of ownership and autonomy around their work (Wacquant 2004, Clarke and Knights 2015). As one coach in Hibernia remarked, it is part of a rugby player’s job to ‘smash shit’. Such a turn of phrase was not derogatory or unfounded, for such coaches are former players, but instead reflects the ‘brute’ nature of a practice that players must find a way to come to terms with (Merleau-Ponty 1964b). The expression of sacrifice is one such way to help create an alternate story to manage such physicality (Douglas and Carless 2009).

Second, owing to the reversible nature of such sacrificial expression, we start to grasp how the players themselves begin to utilise forms of ‘measurement’ outwith the administration of statistics and quantification (Levy 2015). Within Hibernia, it always felt like there was a ‘parallel’ measurement system at work (Cunliffe and Coupland 2011). On the one hand, there was the use of imported statistical abstractions that arose from the financial and performative drive towards professionalism (Fletcher and Wagstaff 2009; Houlihan and Chapman 2015). On the other hand, however, there was still a highly situated means for players to ‘measure’ their performance, something potentially founded well before the onset of professionalisation of rugby in 1995 (O’Brien and Slack 2004). This form of evaluation was incarnated in representations that evoked ideas of courage, martyrdom, and hard work that may all potentially be expressed as sacrifice (Merleau-Ponty 1968). Examples include the idea of the courage board or how tackles were delivered and defined. Through expressed sacrifice having this reversible quality, we began to grasp the traditional forms which players used to ‘assess’ each other (Stanton 2000). Indeed, Rik’s dismissal of a colleague as simply ‘happy to be paid’ suggests these forms of measurement still hold considerable sway in rugby. It must be reinforced though that such measurement is only sensible within the communal and organisational situation in which the players are located (Burkitt 2000). In equating the idea of performance management solely with statistical techniques in sport, however, we may miss the resonance that these incarnations hold in how players assign value to themselves (Swann et al. 2015).

Conclusion

This paper has looked to extend the literature on performance management to further understand how it is expressed in practice. Within sport, the technology of such management aims to regulate bodies in order to attain limitless performances. We suggest that such an aspiration is predicated on a bounded view of the body, a dualistic position that occurs at the 'skin' creating a schism of body and world. Such a bounded body underpins performance management's ambition for causality, suggesting its related techniques can 'work' on the 'outside' of bodies in a linear fashion. We utilise Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversible flesh to illustrate that such a bounded view is a fallacy, with the relation between body and technology a more complicated affair. Within our study on Hibernia we use 'rich' examples from the players' day to day activities interspersed with Merleau-Ponty's corporeal schema to illustrate that the players did not necessarily reject or accept the use of such technology, but looked to incarnate, or make flesh, their own expression of sacrifice through them.

We suggest that, through the expression of any phenomenon, bodies 'gear into' said gestures communally in order to draw out personal forms of meaning. Within Hibernia we argue that the expression of sacrifice, through monitoring technology, informs performance management in two ways. Initially, it legitimises for the players the brutal, and physical, nature of their sport. With rugby careers growing ever shorter and financial returns limited from such a precarious profession, conceptions of sacrifice as a meaningful expression become increasingly powerful. Communal expressions of sacrifice therefore will draw on such technology to reassure those involved that they are delivering 'good rugby'. Second, the research suggests wariness when defining performance management. Certainly within Hibernia statistics and technology were deployed, but we also illustrate that the players utilised a 'parallel' measurement system, which generally drew on pre-professional values around courage and work ethic. Within performance management research scholars need to

be sure they also include any situated, local, forms that workers use to ‘measure’ how they deem themselves of worth productively.

Merleau-Ponty's fleshy ontology illustrates how the world around us does not contain discernible, self-creating entities, but bodies and objects that continually co-construct each other. Rather than seeing our bodies as ‘meat’, his work enables us to examine the body as continually interwoven within the ‘flesh’ of organising. It suggests that such organisational life is more ‘wild-flowering’ than mechanical, in which the expression of phenomena can occur by drawing on rather unexpected aspects (Merleau-Ponty 1964b). This paper has attempted to illustrate that performance management is not some causal force within organisations that dominates bodies or creates forms of ‘resistance’, but rather is ‘veiled with shadows’ by being much more complex in practice (Merleau-Ponty 1968). Through such an ontology of flesh, we have sought to loosen this functional ‘grip’, and illustrate that those involved in organisations can draw on a ‘bundle’ of material possibilities in order to enact meaningful situated phenomena (Shotter 2010).

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