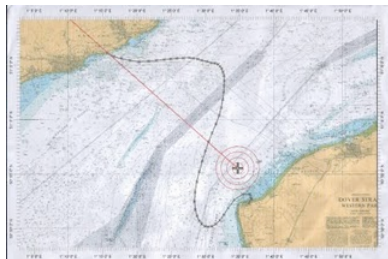


“Who are you swimming for?”: English Channel swimming, charitable fund-raising and the construction of alliances of suffering

Karen Throsby¹

Presentation at the Third International Sport and Society Conference, held at Cambridge University on 23-25 July, 2012²

When I told people, back in 2010, that I was training for an English Channel swim that summer, one of the most common responses was the question: “Who are you swimming for?”, or more directly, “I’ll sponsor you”. This assumption of charitable fund-raising, then, provides the starting point for this paper: how can we understand the normative congealing of the relationship between charitable fund-raising and Channel swimming? What social and identity processes and relationships are enacted (and resisted) through the practice of “swimming for...”?



I’m not sure how much people know about English Channel swimming, but just as a quick explanation – this involves swimming from England to France, wearing a standard swimming costume, cap and goggles. The Channel is 21 miles across at its shortest point, and the average crossing time is around 13.5 hours, but ranges

¹ Karen Throsby is an associate professor at the University of Warwick. Her research focuses on the intersections of gender, technology and the body. She is currently working on a project entitled *Becoming a Channel Swimmer*. This is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, and combines her own experiences of training to swim the English Channel with a broader ethnographic study of the wider marathon swimming community. You can learn more about the research by visiting the project website at:

<http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/channelswimmer>

² Please note that this is the text from an *oral presentation*, and consequently is not presented to publishable standards.

from just under 7 hours, to almost 29 hours. In this paper, I'm talking specifically about solo Channel swimming, although it's important to note that there is now a burgeoning charity market in relay Channel swims, with many organisations pre-booking swims and advertising places in exchange for minimum fund-raising requirements.

It has been well argued – for example, in the work of Mauss and Titmuss - that 'giving' is never purely altruistic, but is also an expression of people's relationship to society (and perhaps, a demonstration or performance of that relationship). This is not to question the altruism of giving, but to argue that giving (and therefore, fund-raising) is always about *more than* altruism. As Sarah Moore argues in her analysis of "ribbon culture", visible acts of charity say something about the *kind* of person that you are – as compassionate and caring. This is a socially significant act when you consider that "compassion is not only a prized character trait, but has come to constitute a central aspect of identity in contemporary society" (2008: 32) – especially in the context of the contemporary retrenchment of welfare, and the transfer of welfare responsibilities onto individuals and charities.

As well as an opportunity to show compassion, in their analysis of the London Marathon, Nettleton and Hardey (2006) argue charity sporting challenges also provide an opportunity to publicly display good citizenship through a demonstrably fit and healthy body. However, in this paper, I want to suggest that whilst enacting compassion, charitable fund-raising in Channel swimming, rather than being reliant on overt and public displays of health and fitness, relies instead on primarily on narratives of suffering - and more specifically, it relies on the creation of alliances of suffering, both between and among swimmers, donors, charities and intended charity recipients. Of course, all charitable fund-raising in sport relies to some extent on the trading of suffering for donations; an entirely pleasurable or luxurious practice would not 'earn' sponsorship in the same way. But in the case of Channel swimming (and perhaps other ultra-endurance sports), suffering – as a facet of the excessive or extreme nature of the practice - becomes the defining feature (rather than 'getting fit', for example –

indeed, the relative extremity of Channel swimming make it difficult to code as healthy). It is suffering that gives Channel swimming what Michael Atkinson (2008) calls its 'exciting significance' – both within the sport, and in its public narrative. This sentiment is reflected in the Just Giving pages of prospective Channel swimmers, which commonly highlight the anticipated hazards of the sport rather than its pleasures: pain, sickness, fear, tankers, pollution, sewerage, jellyfish, hypothermia etc. It is the ability and willingness to suffer – narrated but rarely witnessed because of the nature of the sport as taking place out of general sight - that is traded for sponsorship: or what Nick Stanhope (2005) describes in his "ultimate charity handbook", "swapping blood and sweat for charity". I suggest that this enables swimmers to establish self identity as both possessed of the morally valued traits of self-control and bodily discipline (as demonstrated through the ability and desire to suffer), and as a compassionate and socially engaged individual (suffering for a cause). As Stanhope states in the optimistically uncritical prologue to his handbook: "Charity challenges are powerful vehicles for realizing personal goals and raising vast sums of money for charity" (2005: 11) – a win-win construction that position the two practices as mutually, and unproblematically, reinforcing.

For the last two and a half years, I've been working on an ESRC-funded, multi-sited auto-ethnographic and ethnographic study called "Becoming a Channel Swimmer". This has involved spending time with swimmers, coaches, family members at training and swimming sites around the world (the UK, Malta, Ireland, the US) observing, interviewing, and generally jumping in and getting wet. Drawing on interview data from this project, in the remainder of this paper, I'm going to look very briefly at two aspects of the relationship between Channel swimming and charitable fund-raising, and the alliances of suffering that are forged in the process. Firstly, I'm going to look at the ways in which, for some swimmers, fund-raising is a necessary counter to the inevitable self-directedness of the Channel swimming project; and then secondly, at some of the ways that the swimmers engaged critically with the pressures to 'swim for'.

* * * * *

“I could not do something like a Channel swim without attaching it to a charity” (Bill)³.

For many of the participants – and especially those coming to the sport as a ‘one-off’ challenge – it was inconceivable to not ‘swim for’. Bill, for example, went on to explain: **“It just makes perfect sense for me to use the Channel swim as a vehicle to make a difference for other people”**. And of course, you could argue that it ‘makes sense’ precisely because that’s what we have already been conditioned to see as self-evident.

For some, swimming for charity was part of a much more long-standing commitment to a particular charity, or the decision to swim had been triggered by a life event, health crisis or personal loss. This marks out another dimension to alliances of suffering – between loved ones, between the past and the present etc. – and although there is no time to discuss this here today, there is certainly much more to be said on the use of ‘swimming for’ as a form of memorialisation. But notwithstanding these very personal motivations for ‘swimming for’, it was also very common for participants to ‘swim for’ a particular charity, or portfolio of charities, to which they had relatively tenuous connections; choices which were either the result of ‘shopping around’, or through direct solicitation from charity activists. Phil, for example, told me: **“...with regards to picking the charity, I had no charities in mind as such. It was [friend], one of my support team, it was his idea because his wife is involved with [the charity] and he said ‘would you fancy doing it for them?’”**. In this case, the specific charity was less important than the fact that he was swimming for a charity: **“I did not want to do it or myself, I wanted to achieve something more for someone else”**. Charitable fund-raising, then, serves as a means of countering the potentially overly self-regarding aspects of an extreme body project like Channel swimming, which makes considerable demands on time and financial resources.

³ All the interviewee names used here are pseudonyms.

This act of doing something for someone else establishes an alliance of suffering between the swimmer and the intended recipient of the charitable donations. Phil, for example, when asked about the importance of the charity to him said:

“Yes, it was important. It was in my mind when I was doing the swim like, you know...at the end of the day, I am not just doing it for myself, I am doing it for a good cause as well, so I did not want to let them down.”

The act of charitable swimming creates relations of responsibility towards those Others (even though the intended recipients are unlikely to be aware of that particular charity challenge); and this in turn, is mobilized to inspire the swimmer to endure their own suffering while swimming. Several participants swimming for disease charities, for example, told me that in moments of struggle or pain, they would imagine the more inescapable suffering of the charity’s recipients in order to put their own, provisional, suffering into perspective and enable them to endure. This collapses the distinction between the swimmers and the charity’s recipients by contingently allying their sufferings, whilst at the same time reiterating the distinctions between them. Significantly, this sense of ‘letting people down’ extends not only to charity recipients, but also to the charities themselves, and those who have donated money; these alliances of suffering, then, establish relationships between the different actors – swimmer, sponsors, charities, charity recipients – that channel a flow of money from well to sick, from rich to poor, from north to south (although without necessarily raising a fundamental political challenge to the relations of power that produce those circumstances of need). As has also been noted of ‘ribbon cultures’, these acts of giving are rarely accompanied by overt political activism.

But for all of the expectations of ‘swimming for’, my research also revealed considerable resistance to those pressures. The most common critique came in relation to the time demands of fund-raising, which many found unmanageable alongside the already onerous demands of training. As David argued:

I was just swimming because I just wanted to swim. There are lots of causes that I want to raise money for, and do, but I didn't want the pressure, or the hassle, or the details...because I'd spend so much time and so much organization doing it that I thought I'd just leave it alone."

David's decision to swim because he wanted to swim is a socially risky one in a context where 'swimming for' is the presumed norm, and swimming 'for yourself' can appear excessively self-absorbed. However, this is negotiated partly by signaling his charitable identity elsewhere, and partly by highlighting his desire to not want to do a job half-heartedly or badly. He positions himself, then, as compassionate, disciplined and self-reflexive; as a good neoliberal subject (and in pointing this out, I'm not suggesting that he is not those things...but rather highlighting that the absence of charitable involvement has to be accounted for). This notion of 'swimming because I just wanted to swim' also recalls the 'purist' runners in Nettleton and Hardey's study, for whom running and fund-raising were mutually exclusive practices, placing a greater focus instead on the intrinsic pleasures and challenges of the practice.

Greg, took a more directly critical approach, and launched into a vociferous tirade against those individuals who he felt overstated their charitable intentions, while understating their personal goals:

"What I object to [...] is when this kind of thing is trumpeted about, and presented as someone doing something because they have a calling to do something to do with charity: "I'm not swimming the Channel because I want to swim the Channel, or because I want a personal challenge; I'm swimming because I want to raise money for this cause or that cause". And it really irritates me. There's this person at [my swimming club] who sends e-mails about three times a year saying "I'm doing this now. The reason I'm doing it is for this cause". And my response is: "Bollocks". The reason you're doing it is because you want to swim the Channel."

Greg's cynicism does not reflect a complete rejection of charitable Channel swimming – indeed, although he originally didn't intend to swim for charity, following a comment from his mother that **“people will think it's a bit weird if you don't do it for charity”**, he eventually decided that **“it's probably a big enough challenge that people may...friends may actually want to support it”**. Others reached a similar decision after people just sent them money, unsolicited and without concern for *which* charity, driving the swimmer to seek out a charitable cause to which to donate the money. But here, Greg is insisting on the *dual* aspects of the practice, and resisting those who he deems to be overplaying the 'compassion' card, who he sees as attempting to position themselves as morally superior. Instead, Greg insists on the self-transformative pleasures to be gained from the challenge of Channel swimming thereby marking another alliance of suffering – that among the Channel swimmers themselves, as a defining aspect of sub-cultural belonging through socially sanctioned values of self-control, bodily discipline and self-transformation via the encounter with suffering. Indeed, it is generally 'not done' to solicit sponsorship *within* the Channel swimming community, since charity work is seen as outward looking; within the community, suffering is a defining feature, not a deserving exception that can be traded for sponsorship (although a notable exception occurs here in relation to memorialization following losses within the community, for example).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that there is a normative expectation, and especially from those outside the Channel swimming community, that people should 'swim for' a charitable cause. For many of the swimmers, charitable fund-raising provides a meaningful counter to the intensely self-directed nature of the process of becoming a Channel swimmer. However, I have also argued that swimmers were able to resist these pressures, primarily by laying claim to the self-transformative, intrinsic motivations for Channel swimming (motivations which fit well within contemporary social pressures to work on, and exercise control over, the self, but which also carry the risk of appearing problematically disengaged socially). I argue that the idea of 'suffering' is central to both the self-directed and socially-directed work of Channel swimming, forming provisional

and shifting alliances of suffering between and among actors in order to give meaning to an extreme bodily practice such as Channel swimming. To be absolutely clear, I am not arguing that those who are 'swimming for' a cause are anything other than sincere in their altruistic intent and I applaud their efforts; rather, I want to suggest that this is not the only factor in trying to understand how and why 'swimming for' appears self-evident in relation to Channel swimming. It is also important to note, then, that the seemingly win-win scenario of achieving personal goals AND raising lots of money for charity embodies a number of normative tensions and expectations; what we have come to understand as an easy and obvious fit – swimming for charity – is not so obvious once you acknowledge how tricky it is to say you are swimming for *yourself*, and not for charity.

References

- Atkinson, M (2008) "Triathlon, suffering and exciting significance" Leisure Studies 27 (2): 165-180
- Moore, S. E. H. (2008). Ribbon Culture: Charity, Compassion and Public Awareness. Houndmills, Palgrave.
- Nettleton, S. and J. Hardey (2006). "Running away with health: the urban marathon and the construction of "charitable bodies"." Health 10(4): 441-460.
- Stanhope, N (2005) Blood, Sweat and Charity: The Ultimate Charity Challenge Handbook Bridgnorth: Eye Books