

If I could turn back time? Footwear, identity and the lifecourse.

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This paper presents data from a 3 year ESRC-funded project on footwear, identity and transition. With a starting point in fairytale and shoe designers' promises of magical transformation (once we step into the right shoes), sociological and anthropological methods have been used to explore the role of shoes within everyday and life course *transitions*. By inviting participants to catalogue all their shoes, log their transitions between pairs, take us shoe-shopping, have us film them in an activity of choice, complete an independent scrapbook/journal – and meet us for interview three times, we are finding out how shoes mediate the relationship between individuals and the process of ageing across the life course. Rather than a series of fixed transitions – and a straightforward and shared desire always to 'turn back time', different temporal strategies have emerged. 'Turning back time' proves not to be simply a matter of trying to look young in any generic sense. Shoes associated with 'the past' may indeed be purchased and worn, but is this an earlier period in an individual's life, or an era someone wishes to evoke in their 'look'? Equally, buying shoes worn by one's much younger contemporaries – shoes of the present – may bear no relationship with one's previous age-based identity and everything to do with one's future. In sum, once we begin to map out a participant's shoe landscape, including the shoes they have been inspired by as well as worn, those that have anchored them to the past or embodied the future, we gain a more complex and nuanced picture of ageing and appearance across the life course. As our data show, an apparently linear, chronologised life course can be susceptible to subversion through the wearing of shoes which locate people in different

eras and epochs, not only symbolically but also quite literally as they tie up their laces or fasten their Velcro.

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