

# *Citius, Altius, Fortius*: Managers' quest for heroic leader identities

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## Abstract

In this paper, we draw on Foucault's concept "governmentality" to show how a cohort of middle-aged senior managers who engaged in competitive endurance sports fabricated (avowed) "heroic" leader identities drawing on this repertoire of discursive resources. Neoliberalism constitutes a form of governmentality which encourages people to regard themselves as autonomous and to aspire to personal fulfillment by investing entrepreneurially in themselves as "human capital." Healthism, which requires individuals be responsible for their own health and wellbeing, is one program by which this is accomplished. We analyze managers' talk about themselves as people who self-examined, and sought continually to transform (improve) themselves, to avow identities as superior (heroic) leaders. Our study contributes to the literature on governmentality by showing how in neoliberalism "healthism" constructs managers as enterprising selves.

## Keywords

Enterprising selves, Foucault, governmentality, healthism, heroic leader identity, neoliberalism

"I could not keep [the story of] my first Ironman secret as it became kind of a legend really. [. . .] My collaborators were saying 'the President is out. . . to complete an ironman!' Many of them in [the] Nice [offices] followed the race all day long on the Internet. All-day-long! And they got anxious at one time because my [digital tracking] chip stopped working for a while and therefore I disappeared from their screens. Several collaborators thought that I had given up. At that moment, it was like in a legendary tale, like in a phantasmagoria about the figure of the leader. I mean, the leader is always seen as being superhuman" (#21).

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## Introduction

As evidenced by a vast literature of self-aggrandizing autobiographies penned by iconic corporate figures and hagiographic accounts of swathes of lesser known individuals, heroic leader identities are notoriously attractive both to managers of business organizations and their followers (Allison et al., 2017; Gabriel, 1997; Manz and Sims, 1991; Villette and Vuillermot, 2009; Wilkins et al., 1990). Drawing on Foucault's (2008 [1978–9]) concept “governmentality” we analyze how a cohort of middle-aged senior managers who engaged in competitive endurance sports fabricated “heroic” identities from this specific (healthist-athletic) repertoire of discursive resources. Heroic leader identities, we argue, are particularly appealing in, symptomatic perhaps of, contemporary neoliberalism, a mode of governmentality that encourages people to construe themselves as autonomous, entrepreneurial “bundles of abilities, attributes, and qualities” (Dilts, 2011: 136; cf. Donzelot, 1984; Lemke, 2011; Rose et al., 2006). The contribution we make is to show how managers subjectivities are shaped by neoliberal healthist injunctions to be a particular kind of person, an *enterprising self*.

Understood in the broad sense of “the conduct of conduct” governmentality provides a conceptual framework for studying those means by which various projects of government “govern different aspects of social reality” (Weidner, 2009: 389). Neoliberalism constitutes a form of governmentality which encourages people to regard themselves as autonomous and to aspire to personal fulfillment by investing entrepreneurially in themselves as “human capital” (Dilts, 2011; Foucault, 2008 [1978–9]; Read, 2009; Rose, 1989). Work and the workplace are a crucial site for governmental programmes that shape “the formation and administration of individual and group identities” (Rose et al., 2006: 95; cf. Miller and Rose, 1988: 175) as documented by a substantial literature on identities and identity work in and around organizations (Brown, 2015). Our focus is “a contemporary requirement that individuals be responsible for their own health and wellbeing” (Coffey, 2015), specifically how a cohort of (mostly French and male) senior managers drew on their participation in endurance sports activities to constitute their selves not merely as responsible, moral agents, and economic-rational actors but socially esteemed, heroic leaders.

This research contributes primarily to what Raffnsøe et al. (2019) identify as the third “wave” of the “Foucault effect in organization studies” (p. 156) associated with governmentality. In doing so, it draws also on what they refer to as the second Foucauldian wave concerned with how talk and discourse generally “shape how subjects can act and be” (Raffnsøe et al., 2019: 165). As McKinlay and Taylor (2014: 2) have argued, “governmentality has proved to be perhaps Foucault’s most productive concept” with studies of governmentality flourishing initially in a wide range of the social sciences, including accounting, and also history and philosophy before being taken up by organization theorists (e.g., Clegg et al., 2002; McKinlay and Pezet, 2017; McKinlay and Taylor, 2014; Moonesirust and Brown, 2021). Our paper adds to Foucauldian studies that employ the concept of governmentality to explore and explain the construction of entrepreneurial identities/subjectivities.<sup>1</sup> The contribution we make is to show how in neoliberalism people in organizations draw on healthist discourses to fabricate desired identities as heroic leaders.

We focus on how governmental discourses affect identities through the operation of technologies of the self—such as “self-examination” and “self-transformation”—that are means by which people constitute their selves as objects that can be measured, judged, improved, and avowed. Although techniques or technologies of the self have attracted considerable attention from Foucauldian organizational scholars interested in processes of self-construction, this has mostly been in relation to the exercise of disciplinary power (e.g. Covalleski et al., 1998; Grey, 1994; Skinner, 2013; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009; Watson, 2008). Scholarship on governmentality has paid more attention to how authorities develop, promote, and deploy neoliberal discourses than

how these are appropriated by subjects, and indeed the success of such discourses in producing neoliberal subjectivities is sometimes merely presumed. As Weidner (2009: 391) asserts, in many studies “One is left. . . either to assume the efficacy of these discourses or to wonder exactly how they work’ and whether they do ‘in fact produce the desired form of subjectivity’.” Our investigation of how a group of individuals constructed their selves from discourses and practices associated with one program of neoliberalism (healthism) aligns with Foucault’s (1997[1983]: 262) observation “that if one wants to analyse the genealogy of the subject in Western civilization, he<sup>2</sup> has to take into account not only techniques of domination but also techniques of the self.”

## Governmentality, healthism, and hero identities

Governmentality is “understood in the broad sense of techniques and procedures for directing human behavior” (Foucault, 1997: 82). Rather than a “theory” the governmentality approach is best regarded as a form of questioning (Rose et al., 2006: 85) or methodology (Weidner, 2009: 407) for analyzing how, and through what rationalities, techniques and practices subjects are governed. It refers to an “ensemble” (Foucault, 1979: 20), “apparatus” (Weiskopf and Munro, 2012), or “dispositive” (Raffnsøe et al., 2016) of institutions, procedures, networks, forms of practical knowledge, vocabularies, types of authority and judgments, objects, devices, and tactics for the “conduct of conduct” by calculated means (Foucault, 1980: 194; Li, 2007: 276; Rose, 1999: 52). The putative purpose of governmentality is “welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health, et cetera” (Foucault, 1991: 100). Rather than seek directly to coerce individuals or to minutely regulate their actions, government operates at a distance to manufacture consent, to educate desires and to configure habits, aspirations, and beliefs, often in ways that people are not aware of (Li, 2007: 275). Specific programs of government—consisting of a goal or goals to be accomplished, a rationale that makes them thinkable/knowable and a series of strategies and techniques etc.—are targeted at populations (Li, 2007: 279; Rose, 1999: 33).

Recognizing that “government” is a portmanteau notion referring to the multitude of ways the self is related to power, and that governmentalities promote particular subjectivities, means attending to “the points where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion or domination” (Foucault, 1993: 203). That is, governmentality operates at the level of the individual (at least in part) through *technologies of the self* “. . . which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault, 1988: 18). It is through technologies of the self, such as “self-examination” (by which selves are constituted as measurable objects) and “self-transformation” (through which people evaluate and correct their selves) that “. . . the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion” (Foucault, 2000: 291). Of particular interest is avowal (confession) which ties people to notionally desired versions of themselves:

“In an avowal, he who speaks obligates himself to being what he says he is. He obligates himself to being the one who did such and such a thing, who feels such and such a sentiment; and he obligates himself because it is true” (Foucault, 2014: 16).

Thus are people constituted actively as subjects through those verbalizations by which they bond themselves to “truth,” confession being “at the heart of the procedure of individualization by power” (Foucault, 1978: 58–59). That is, individuals “are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising . . . power” (Foucault, 1980: 98). Power produces the “subject” but “subjection consists of the dual process of subjugation (or subordination) and subjectivation” by which individuals constitute themselves as active agents (Chan, 2000: 1063).

As Foucault (2008: 260) in his 1978–1979 lectures made clear, neoliberalism is a particular mode of governmentality that works through an internal subjection of individuals, that transforms them into enterprising selves, into “eminently governable subject[s]” (Dilts, 2011: 136; cf. Fleming, 2012, 2014; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Gill, 2015; Gregg, 2011). Operating on people’s ‘interests, desires, and aspirations’ (Read, 2009: 29) neoliberalism obliges subjects to constitute themselves as autonomous subjects while requiring them to conduct and account for their lives responsibly. The enterprising self strives “for fulfilment, excellence and achievement” (Rose, 1989: 6), is characterized by initiative, ambition and calculation, and seeks to “optimize” their relationship with their labor, regarding their leisure time as a means to supplement their organization-based work (Donzelot, 1991; Lemke, 2011). Under conditions of neoliberalism workers are rendered competitive creatures “whose tendency to compete must be fostered” (Read, 2009: 28), and who regard salary as the revenue that is earned on an initial investment, an investment in one’s skills or abilities’ (Read, 2009: 28). Often building on Foucault, a range of commentators have similarly argued that contemporary capitalism requires individuals who regard themselves as autonomous subjects, who enact their subjection assuming that they possess free will, and who consider they are “entrepreneurs of themselves” (Dilts, 2011: 130; Rose et al., 2006: 90).

One program of neoliberalism, “healthism,” has as its aim to encourage citizens to manage their mental and physical health in order (notionally) to enhance their quality of life (Coffey, 2015; Miller and Rose, 1988). The discourse and practices associated with “healthism” constitute one “technology” of governmentality, such technologies being “always local and multiple, intertwining coherent or contradictory forms of activating and managing a population” (Donzelot, 1979: 77). In France, as elsewhere in the West, it is associated with multifarious national and local government departments and agencies, mass and social media campaigns, support for prestige sports events, the development of knowledge and standards that allow people to be measured and ranked, and outliers problematized and subject to programs of medical correction (Barbusse, 2009; Cubizolles et al., 2018). Such initiatives serve to induce in people a calculative, responsabilized relation to their future health and well-being with specific implications for how they are meant to lead their lives, for example by taking regular exercise, eating healthily, monitoring their weight, and attending health checks. Our specific interest is in the discourse and practices associated with endurance sports and cardiovascular fitness which managers and professionals are increasingly exhorted to adopt (Land and Taylor, 2010; Maravelias, 2018).

Research has shown how organizations and professions construct regulative regimes that promote norms of health and fitness to which members are encouraged to conform (Costas et al., 2016; Johansson et al., 2017). Recognizing that physical bodies are in part cultural fabrications, other studies have focused on how managers are, independent of their organizations, often “extremely health conscious” and regard their bodies “as a thing to be managed” (Connell and Wood, 2005: 355; Longhurst, 2001). It has also been observed that fitness activities may be engaged in by workers to symbolize commitment and dedication (Waring and Waring, 2009), and that “. . . discourses of health, fitness and sports and those of management and professionalism” may often “blend in contemporary organizations” (Johansson et al., 2017: 4). A further set of studies suggest that sporting prowess can be a source of status for managers and professionals and that to be deemed an “athlete” is to be idealized as someone who is able better to perform (Kelly et al., 2007). Meriläinen et al. (2015), for example, have shown how “competence” can become embroiled in a local discourse of “*embodied capability*” (p. 616), supposed mastery of the healthy body, and an ingredient of an acknowledged fitness to lead. Little attention, however, has been devoted to the technologies of the self—self-examination, self-transformation—by which people avow heroic leader identities in relation to their practice of endurance sports.

Middle aged managers are increasingly subject to social discourses that position them as “past it” (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008; Riach and Cutcher, 2014; Tulle, 2008), and part of the allure of competitive endurance sports is that they allow these individuals to construct their selves drawing on alternate heroic leader/manager discourses that emphasize physical prowess. Carlyle (1841: 19) famously observed that “society is founded on hero worship,” while more recently, Allison et al. (2017) have commented on the pervasiveness of narratives about human greatness across societies. Archetypal hero figures are deeply engrained in all cultures (Campbell, 1988[1949]) and loom significantly in discourses relating to work and particularly business organizations (Allison et al., 2017; Manz and Sims, 1991; Stewart et al., 2011; Wilkins et al., 1990). Leaders of companies are routinely depicted in highly masculinized terms (Calás and Smircich, 1991; Kerfoot and Knights, 1998) as heroes “different from mere mortals” (Villette and Vuillermot, 2009: 2) and sometimes even “gods” (Gabriel, 1997). Indeed, heroic leader narratives often merge with corporate prescriptions which position people with “extraordinary” sports abilities and lean/muscular physiques, as ideals to be aspired to (Berinato, 2015; Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Kelly et al., 2007; Meriläinen et al., 2015).

Our focus is how a cohort of senior managers drew on their competitive endurance sports activities to construct versions of their selves as heroic leaders with superior abilities. In so doing, we contribute to broader debates on how the neo-liberal individual operates as “an entrepreneur of himself” (Foucault, 2008 [1978–9]: 226) and “. . . accepts that the ‘rules of the game’ oblige him to commit forcefully to the improvement of his own human capital and position in the market” (Kiersey, 2009: 385). While always there is scope for subjects to observe, interpret and reflect on their selves, yet the neoliberal subject as suggested in our study, is also one that is coerced to be choice-making, and whose identity constructions are, significantly, effects of power.

## Research design

This interpretive study was designed to investigate how senior managers fabricated their selves in relation to health and athletic self-discipline. France, where approximately 12 million people (17% of the population) run at least once a week (French Athletic Federation, 2016), was an appropriate context for our research. In common with other European nations, the French populace has been subject to numerous Government-inspired educational programs designed to persuade individuals to take personal responsibility for their health and fitness and which position those who do not as inferior and sometimes morally deficient (Crawford, 2006; Cubizolles et al., 2018; Lupton, 1995). Recent corporate initiatives focused on encouraging workers to participate in sports have also been influential (Barbusse, 2009). France now boasts some of the most internationally prestigious endurance running events such as the Ultra-Trail du Mont Blanc, les 100 km de Millau, la Sainté Lyon, and the ironman races of Nice and Vichy.

## Data collection

Participants for our study were recruited using the membership list of a well-known French athletics club which specializes in iron-man training and a Linked-in group of “marathon finishers.” The data were collected by two of the co-authors of this article. Our sample consisted of semi-structured interviews with 33 senior managers in charge of businesses (or teams within them) of between 15 and 1500 employees. Representing a broad range of sectors, 27 were men, 30 were French nationals, and 28 worked in France (see Table 1). The minimum criteria used to select interviewees were that they had participated in at least one endurance running event (marathon, ultra-marathon, triathlon, or iron-man<sup>3</sup>) for two consecutive years. Preparation for these types of

**Table 1.** Overview of interviewees.

| No | Job title                              | Industry                              | Years in industry | Gender | Nationality | Location    |
|----|--|---------------------------------------|-------------------|--------|-------------|-------------|
| 1  | Head of the customer relationship team | Aeronautic industry                   | 12                | Female | US          | France      |
| 2  | Regional director                      | Car rental industry                   | 26                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 3  | Commercial director                    | Conference and hotel industry         | 19                | Female | France      | France      |
| 4  | Regional director                      | Retail banking                        | 30                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 5  | Commercial director                    | Tourism                               | 22                | Male   | France      | UK          |
| 6  | Regional director                      | Catering industry                     | 17                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 7  | CEO                                    | Temporary workforce provider industry | 24                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 8  | Site manager                           | Pharmaceutical retail industry        | 20                | Male   | France      | UK          |
| 9  | IT director                            | Banking                               | 20                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 10 | CFO                                    | Private healthcare industry           | 15                | Female | France      | France      |
| 11 | CEO                                    | Venture capital industry              | 30                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 12 | CEO                                    | IT services                           | 40                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 13 | CEO                                    | Consumer goods manufacturing          | 30                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 14 | Country director                       | Energy supply and distribution        | 17                | Male   | France      | Italy       |
| 15 | Principal in a consulting firm         | Strategic consulting                  | 10                | Male   | Belgium     | Belgium     |
| 16 | CEO                                    | Telecom systems manufacturing         | 31                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 17 | Marketing director                     | Travel industry                       | 20                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 18 | International lawyer                   | Trade law consulting                  | 10                | Male   | Belgium     | Belgium     |
| 19 | Head of digital marketing              | Travel industry                       | 20                | Female | France      | France      |
| 20 | CEO                                    | Consumer goods industry               | 20                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 21 | CEO                                    | Recycling and composting              | 26                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 22 | HR director supervising                | Seeds and gardening                   | 19                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 23 | CFO                                    | Travel industry                       | 14                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 24 | CEO                                    | Food industry                         | 25                | Male   | France      | Netherlands |
| 25 | CEO                                    | Horticulture industry                 | 34                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 26 | HR director                            | Sport equipment industry              | 30                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 27 | HR director                            | Digital marketing industry            | 17                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 28 | CEO                                    | Design and consulting                 | 18                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 29 | IT project director                    | IT services                           | 30                | Female | France      | France      |
| 30 | HR director                            | Facility management                   | 25                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 31 | Associate (partner)                    | Consulting                            | 17                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 32 | IT director                            | Retail industry                       | 14                | Male   | France      | France      |
| 33 | IT director                            | Retail banking                        | 21                | Female | France      | France      |

race requires up to 20 hours of training per week for a period between 2 and 12 months depending on an individual's prior level of fitness, that is the study concentrates on senior managers for whom endurance running was a significant aspect of their lives. Informants were asked open

questions about their training, racing, diet and diurnal rhythms as well as their work identities in our attempts to elicit talk about the self. The interviews were of between 36- and 94-minutes duration with a mean of 56 minutes. They were audio recorded and fully transcribed into digital files. All interviews were conducted in French, portions of which have been translated into English by the two bilingual French/English-speaking authors of this article.

### *Data analysis*

Consistent with a rich stream of empirical research, we took an approach that suggests a key focus for scholarship is how individuals' construct their worlds, and especially selves, through discourse (e.g. Bardon et al., 2017; Riach and Cutcher, 2014; Watson, 2008). This approach recognizes that processes of discursive self-construction are always on-going, that people generally fabricate multiple desired identities, and that rather than coherent these are usually best characterized as tensional, antagonistic, or even paradoxical (e.g. Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008; Alvesson et al., 2008; Laine et al., 2016). Our analysis was underpinned by three sets of key principles. First, we drew specifically on a tradition of Foucauldian discourse analysis which invites consideration of local (community/organizational) discourses in relation to those at a macro level (social, political, economic, etc.) (Foucault, 1971; cf. Potter, 1997; Willig, 2001).

Second, our analysis was predicated on Foucault's argument that through processes of self-examination and self-transformation individuals are "incited to change themselves by acting on themselves" (Covaleski et al., 1998: 298) and to constitute (avow) their selves as specific subjects, tying them to the "truth" they verbalize (Foucault, 2014). That is, the desired identities people construct are formed within governmental regimes and in relation to specific techniques, practices, and tactics of power (Bardon and Pez , 2020). Third, aligned with other similar studies, managers' self-construals were regarded as practical linguistic accomplishments that were co-constructed in-the-moment and for specific purposes in conjunction with the interviewers (e.g. Meril inen et al., 2004).

Our processes of analysis proceeded in several stages. First, the transcripts were read independently by the two bilingual researchers who through subsequent processes of discussion and negotiation constructed an 88-page data table under relevant thematic category headings (e.g. "professional objectives," "sports objectives," "training," etc.). Second, the data were then re-analyzed and initial linguistic categories collapsed or discarded until a more refined interpretation emerged centered on the construction of superior identities. This resulted in the ordering of our data into four broad themes: "being good is not good enough"; "pushing one's limits"; "giving one's self no rest"; and "measuring one's success." These data were then translated into English allowing a further stage of analysis to take place involving the third (mono-lingual) author in writing-up the data into a series of draft narratives relating to notions of self-examination, self-transformation, and avowal. These were elaborated and refined over time by us and in response to reviewers' comments until the sections which appear in this article emerged. Linguistic translation involves not just "decontextualization" in which meaning loss can occur (Meril inen et al., 2008: 592) but also creative practices (Steyaert and Janssens, 2013: 138) which mean that translations are not unproblematic (Piekkari et al., 2014). While mitigated to an extent by the proficiency of two of the researchers in both English and French, nevertheless we recognize that our study is bounded by the limitations imposed by translation issues.

As we reflexively analyzed the data our concern was to understand how our participants came to know themselves and become tied to certain desired identities through technologies of the self that require individuals to self-examine, to (appropriately) transform and to articulate (so as to affirm) them. In these processes ". . .the speaker becomes known and tied to the intentions, thoughts, and deeds avowed in the discourse" (Covaleski et al., 1998: 297); that is, we focus on how selves are

constituted through “the objectivization of the self by the self” (Foucault, 1988: 240). While our analytical procedures involved systematic, inductive processes, nevertheless it is clear that research of this type is always shaped by researchers’ personal values, and that what is offered is an interpretation of our participants’ construals of self that “inevitably involves the researcher in co-authoring the accounts” (Mallett and Wapshott, 2015: 256). In this respect, we note that all three of the researchers engaged in this project actively participate in endurance sports, and (arguably) our findings reveal as much about us as subjects of power as the senior managers we interviewed.

## Heroic managers, endurance sports, and the self

In these sections, we show how through intertwined processes of self-examination and self-transformation in relation to their practice of competitive endurance sports participants in our study constructed (avowed) identities as superior (heroic) leaders. Consonant with our Foucauldian discourse approach we regard managers as fabricating (avowing) selves and relations of power. Managers talk about their engagement in processes of self-examination and self-transformation also construed their commitment to unending entrepreneurial projects of their selves. That is, in describing themselves as engaging in self-examination managers also constituted their selves as measurable objects and in articulating how they sought to transform their selves, managers worked to achieve these goals. Complementarily, their talk about being superior leaders was tied intimately to attempts to govern others and was also a means to promote neoliberal healthist discourses and practices in their workplaces, strengthening this form of governmentality.

### Self-examination

Managers talked about how they engaged in sports to discover more about their selves. They argued that “Obviously there is a link between our professional life and our sporting life” (#5) and a few compared their professional lives to those of elite sportspeople: “. . . we have the same life as. . . some high level sportsmen because we have a break-neck pace” (#24). Managers said that “sport for me is an extension [of work]” (#13), and spoke about how sports and business relied on “the same logic” (#12) and how traits associated with sports translated into their (and others) professional lives:

“Personally, I think that there is a strong parallel between people who have extreme professional ambitions and marathon [runners], marathon being a sport, in a sense, ‘extreme’” (#18).

Managers described competitive sports, especially marathon running, and the training that supported it, as a form of self-examination that yielded valuable self-insight. They said that through competitive running “you learn about yourself” (#17) and that there was “an introspection side to the fact of practicing long distances” which led to “self-knowledge” (#27):

“I think that running is . . . a way to know yourself better . . . running is a demanding sport, and therefore it also contributes to develop my own skills but also to know my limits. And it is in this sense that running has helped me to know myself better, and therefore also to be attentive to what can be my shortcomings” (#12).

One aspect of this examination of the self, they said, was to evaluate themselves in relation to others. They spoke about “the desire to measure oneself and the desire to, yes, to be calibrated” (#22), claiming that “what motivates me is to measure myself against others” (#19). Continuously, they said, their intent was to assess their selves to discover their full potential. This meant, for example, not merely training but subjecting themselves to the pressures of competitive sport because “it is

only really in competition that you always measure yourself and where you can improve your performance” (#7). For some, while external audiences mattered, primarily they engaged in competitive sports for their own personal satisfaction: “you do it to win over you, to prove yourself that you are able to do it” (#19). A competition was thus often a “race against myself” (#24):

“I feel the need to tell myself ‘Damn it, over the course of your stay on this earth, you have achieved a good number of things’. Why are we here? Well, there is no way to know [. . .] I tell myself ‘Well, I have started a [successful] business and I have a family going well, I need something personal that will give me a chance to challenge my own limits’” (#21).

In sum, in examining and measuring their selves against competitors and personal benchmarks managers constituted themselves as calculable subjects desirous of a particular form of self-insight, that is that which confirmed them as high achievers with putatively “superior” abilities.

### Self-transformation

The managers constructed their selves as people who required themselves to work continuously to transform who they were into ever more physically able specimens. They did this, they said, by setting increasingly demanding goals and disciplining themselves to ensure that they made “progress” from which they could derive satisfaction. Managers said that, through sports, they engaged in on-going processes of goal-directed self-transformation:

“I was traveling 80% of my time abroad, internationally. . . . I had the jet lag, a bad diet, no sport and I was exhausted permanently. Well, when I was going back home, I only wanted one thing, I wanted to sleep. . . . And then, well, I started to realize this, I said to myself ‘Well, man, you have to get back to the sport’. . . . the beginnings were very difficult. . . but very quickly I felt rejuvenated by 10 years” (#24).

Sport was described by many of our respondents as a means to remain outstanding professionals despite the fact that they were getting older:

“The idea is to make sport an integral part of business organizations. . . . I am convinced that it will improve efficiency because we are bound to work for ever longer and we will have to remain young even if we are actually getting older and older. We’ll need to safeguard our physical abilities because work is getting more and more demanding” (#30).

The discourse of self-transformation centered in particular on talk about goals and objectives as means of coercing self-improvement. They said that “I need a goal” (#2), that in working on their selves “objectives really become vital” (#4) and in calibrating who they were goals served as “a reference point” (#10). While goals had always to be “reasonable” yet they needed also to be sufficiently aspirational so that “I try to improve each time” (#1). Managers positioned themselves as participating in competitive sports as a project of self-improvement in which they challenged themselves continuously to perform at a higher level:

“Running marathons, you really go to your limits, *voilà*. And still, I have not quite yet found my limits. . . . it’s not enough for me now. I think that I have to move up to the 80 kilometers, that is, I think, I have a need to go after my limits. We need to surpass ourselves in terms of limits” (#4).

“. . . Constantly, you monitor your training, your weight, you read articles regularly to feed properly in accord with advice from the latest research, you look at the best way to train, the best way to drink . . . . The best sugars to take, etc.” (#21).

Managers employed stories of self-improvement in relation to sports to author their selves as looking also for new challenges in professional contexts, pushing themselves (and sometimes others) to achieve ever more ambitious goals:

“I’m certainly someone who always likes to really push myself, always trying to challenge myself to improve my running, and it is the same at work, I’m always looking for the next challenge” (#1).

The transformation of the self, they asserted, constituted a long-term project that often involved years of preparation and considerable self-discipline:

“. . . I’m planning it [an 80 kilometre run], I do not tell myself overnight ‘Here, I’m going to run 80 kilometers in two months’. No! I’ve been thinking about it for two years” (#4).

“I check my weight . . . I have . . . my average distances per week, per month. . . I look for my . . . cardio, my average speed, my interval sessions, etc., my total mileage. . . Everything is planned. . . I’m trying to use science to help me . . . I also manage the nutrition aspect” (#24).

Managers emphasized the brutality of their training regimens, craved in particular a “feeling of progress” (#31) and took pride in being the kind of person who was “. . . able to hang on, to suffer” (#32). While they occasionally admitted also to feeling anxious and insecure about these physical “tests” of their selves, because in races failure was always a possibility—“there is always this nervousness” (#18) and occasionally “I had a feeling of anxiety” (#23)—such comments were rare. More frequent was interviewees’ talk about how adept they were at multi-tasking and how confident they were about their capacity to find solutions to all kinds of issues and in particular managing family obligations and sporting lives:

“When I got my first daughter, it became difficult to train properly because I sometimes had to keep an eye on her. I therefore started to run with the pushchair. Later on, I got my second daughter but at that time the first one could already ride a bicycle. I would push the pushchair with one hand and the bike with the other hand” (#15).

Indeed, for many this was a source of pride:

“I typically go to bed around 1am as we spend the evening with clients. But I, every morning, every morning I go for a run of 7 or 8 kilometers around 6:15 am. [. . .] I feel good after that. I feel very good. I am proud!” (#13).

“After completing a 12 to 14 km morning run, there is a feeling of pride in arriving to the office ‘at the same time as the others but having already completed something substantial’” (#31).

In talk drawing on discourses of self-betterment through sports managers both created a regime of calculability and policed themselves according to its tenets, seemingly willingly blurring the boundaries “between work and non-work. . . free time and work time” (Fleming, 2012: 288).<sup>4</sup>

### *Superior leaders*

Drawing on their practice of competitive endurance sports and the processes of self-examination and self-transformation associated with them, managers constructed (avowed) themselves as superior (heroic) leaders. They argued that running was “good for strengthening your character” (#25)

and that their sports prowess “is transposable in everyday managerial practice” (#7). One individual said that, for him, sport was his equivalent of a higher degree, and that it had improved him in fundamental ways:

“Most of my counterparts today have a Masters degree. I have zero [higher] education . . . I have learned it through . . . sport. . . that allowed me to understand a lot of things, the role of relationships, working hard, the importance of team spirit” (#2).

Managers insisted that “running . . . helps us to go beyond difficulties” (#5), that “sport makes me more efficient at work,” that it ensures one is “more concentrated, more productive” (#31), and that “running makes it possible to be in a state that is optimal . . . for working hard, to have relationships with others. . . to achieve goals” (#7). One said that practicing sports builds “discipline, efficiency, determination, the ability to change perspective and to see things from a different point” (#18). Others talked about how competitive sports had made them “more flexible” (#3), led them to develop a “certain humility” (#7), and how they had learned “to be patient” (#17), “self-questioning” (#24), and even to “think perhaps a little more independently” (#32). Qualities particularly commented upon were their sports-induced capacity for increased stamina and self-confidence.

Some said that engaging in sport meant that they had superior physical capabilities that benefited them in the workplace: “I see that indeed I am somewhat more tenacious than the average” (#5). They claimed that because “to be successful over long distances requires assiduity and obstinacy” (#27), so “. . . I have capacities, a stamina. . .” (#4), and “perseverance” (#15), that “I’m never tired [at work]” (#10), and that practicing sports had increased “my resistance in the professional context because, now, I am not afraid to wake up at 6 am to wrestle with an issue and even if I finish at 8 pm” (#2). They maintained that “people . . . who do sports have a resilience really much higher than the average. Really, you can really see the difference” (#24), that at work “I have a lot of endurance that I . . . develop by running” (#12), and that runners “have much more energy” (#12) which meant, for example, that they could “recover much more quickly” (#17) from long-haul travel and were able better to cope with long meetings:

“I am good at work when I am in shape, I am energized and . . . I am more resistant to. . . long meetings, I absorb better time difference when I travel, I absorb better work pressure” (#24).

Many said that participating in competitive sports had made them more confident in their professional lives: sport “brings me confidence” (#29), “it gives you confidence in the way you do things” (#31), “makes you stronger” (#2), helps develop a “positive attitude, to say ‘one must be a winner’” (#19), and “gives you a familiarity with objectives, a relationship, a confidence which is perhaps improved” (#28):

“In my professional environment, it [running] may have given me confidence in the fact that I can achieve things” (#11).

Of particular note was that our informants avowed versions of their selves as demanding, exemplary leaders whose athletic prowess was “quite inspirational” (#20) for their subordinates who were encouraged to perform to a higher standard:

“My collaborators know that I am quite demanding. . . They know that when I go for a race in the mountains, I have an objective in mind, that things are planned, and that as long as we’ve not reached the objective, we continue, we stay focused, we keep the eye on the prize until we get there. They know for a fact what to expect from me, it is my management method” (#4).

They said that being known as an endurance sportsperson “brings to your personality a little bit of charisma and respect” (#6) and that “people. . . respect the boss who does this [run]” (#14):

“People do see me as an *extra-terrestre* [a supernatural being, literally ‘coming from outer space’]. I currently work for a consulting mission in marketing. . . and they do look at me as if I were an *extra-terrestre*. For sure, this is very clear [. . .] They’re not critical, but they take me for an *extra-terrestre*. I cannot express it differently: an *extra-terrestre*” (#5).

Managers were often keen to encourage their subordinates to emulate their practice of competitive endurance sports:

“I sometimes run with collaborators. I bring them with me, ‘come on, let’s go for a run together’ . . . Not only did we train together for a while, but we entered a couple of races, with some workers. . .” (#26).

“Each year since 2007 we participate in the XXX triathlon. The company is a sponsor (. . .) In the team competition, I have quite a few collaborators participating in it” (#21).

While this was occasionally done on the pretext of fostering “some cohesion” and allowing “us to know each other better” (#7), mostly it was associated with their concern to improve subordinates’ performance:

“[Running] contributes to performance, to wellbeing, to competition, but also to [reduce] absenteeism. . . You feel a lot better when you run. . . From a psychological and physiological perspective, both individually and collectively, there is no good reason not to run” (#30).

Another element to this discourse of the self was their descriptions of how they employed sports vocabulary and sometimes even training methods in the conduct of their work in efforts to maximize the performance of the individuals and teams they led:

“We call our design workshops ‘sprints’ [*English in the original*], during which we bring together the team and we animate the session and work together in an intense physical and mental way. We feed ourselves continuously during the session in order to keep the energy going and we collectively practice some stretching sessions, some breathing exercises etc.” (#28).

“The way in which I like to manage my team is similar to what my [sports] coach is doing. I try, although it is not always easy, to use what my coach told me when I manage my team” (#3).

Managers maintained that not everyone in their work organizations was able to cope with the demands their “high” performance made on them. One described how a close colleague had mentioned to him that his work rate “was a form of pressure for her” (#21) while another related how his:

“. . . phenomenal work capacity. . . can make it difficult for our teams to cope . . . I lost one of my employees . . . who told me before leaving that ‘you don’t realise what level of energy you expect [from us] and that your working capacity is way beyond standards’” (#27).

This formed part of a rationale, in recruitment practices, whenever possible, to “. . . always give priority to someone who is practicing a sport over someone who doesn’t” (#20), because such people:

“. . . are usually fast to adapt and it is easier for them to do so [than for others] (. . .) These are collaborators with whom you can talk straight, that you can send to the front line, who have a fighting spirit, etc.” (#21).

Such practices, they maintained, meant that:

“In my team I think we are all very similar, once we set an objective we don’t really like to give up. Even if things are getting in the way, we just say ‘Oh it hurts’ [but we continue]” (#1).

In these ways, the managers sought to promote neoliberal-healthist norms and practices in their organizations, and to induce others to engage in the processes of self-examination and self-transformation by which they claimed to have fabricated superior selves.

## Discussion

In this paper, we have shown how a specific group of senior managers embraced the desirability for them to be not only “corporate athletes” (Kelly et al., 2007) but also “life athletes,” and their concern to accumulate supposedly scarce but advantageous capabilities (health, fitness, stamina, confidence, etc.). One contribution our study makes has been to show how societal discourses associated with sports and fitness, while seemingly a diffuse apparatus of control may exert considerable influence over a distinct population. Drawing on Foucault’s concept *governmentality*, we have demonstrated how power “operates indirectly through the manipulation of culture, inculcating the values of competition, entrepreneurship and ‘human capital’ more generally” (Munro, 2012: 348), and how these societal values are translated into individual subjectivities and management practices through technologies of the self, and thus made consequential. Ours is one attempt at “an empirical mapping of governmental rationalities and techniques” (Rose et al., 2006: 99) in neoliberalism, and shows how, spurred by discourses centered on the need to be “successful” and to “achieve,” managers avowed versions of their selves as leaders with superior capabilities. The enterprising self is (often) a heroic self.

Through their avowals of what kind of person they were, managers attached themselves to notably idealized identities (as hard-working, focused, objective-oriented, resilient, high-achievers) conflating fitness with competence (Riach and Cutcher, 2014: 783) in ways consonant with what Whitehead (2002: 120) has described as the “heroic male project.” Their talk about being “high achievers” and “exemplars” for others on the basis of their commitment to practices of self-examination and self-transformation in many ways echo popular (and highly gendered and exclusionary (cf. Calás and Smircich, 1991; Kerfoot and Knights, 1998) prescriptions for what it means to be a heroic leader (Allison et al., 2017; Manz and Sims, 1991; Stewart et al., 2011; Wilkins et al., 1990)). Moreover, the practices associated with endurance sports were appealing to managers because they supported two key discourses by which (notionally superior) professionals are putatively made, namely “autonomy”—the exercise of independent judgment and discretion—and “ambition”—the development and progression of a career through a project of the self (Costas et al., 2016; Grey, 1994). That is, talk about their engagement in endurance sports allowed managers to construct identities as autonomous, self-motivated and sovereign, and also ambitious, aspirational and high-performing, and to (supposedly) embody these life qualities by appearing slim, toned, and healthy and thus “to enact and spell out their professional selves with their own bodies” (Costas et al., 2016: 16).

This research aligns with other studies that have analyzed how work and life are now “intertwined and interdependent” (Land and Taylor, 2010: 398) such that “. . . firm boundaries between personal and professional identities no longer apply” (Gregg, 2011: 2). Such processes leave

people “permanently poised for work” (Fleming, 2014: 884), encourage them to regard their selves as “a collection of assets that must be continually invested in, nurtured, managed, and developed” (Martin, 2000: 582), and indicate “a deepening and intensification of control that transgresses work/life boundaries” (Land and Taylor, 2010: 409). Governmental power, however, is neither homogeneous nor totalizing and is limited by, for example, individuals’ capacity for agency, available knowledge and techniques, and countervailing discourses which pose the possibility of “critical challenge” (Li, 2007: 277). Notable in this respect is that while our participants apparently enthusiastically embraced healthist injunctions to assume responsibility for their cardiovascular health, nevertheless, they also occasionally spoke about the anxieties and insecurities attached to their self-imposed requirement to achieve at an ever-higher level which they associated with their elite identities (Gill, 2015). More thorough-going critiques that position those who devote their lives to “fitness” as obsessives or fanatics and which make those who participate in competitive endurance sports the target for disdain (even ridicule) rather than admiration, are not hard to find (e.g. Roberts, 2018), and highlight the highly selective nature of our sample.

Much prior work has cast light on how people variously resist, deflect and co-opt neoliberal discourses (e.g. Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Meriläinen et al., 2004). The managers we interviewed are of interest partly because they had apparently accepted (largely unquestioningly) a governmentality that coerced them to engage in time-consuming, and often physically painful activities. This was, after all, a demanding regime of governmentality that obliged them to train exhaustively, monitor and strive to improve their performances, regulate their diet, compete in organized events, and to encourage others to become members of the competitive endurance sports community. Furthermore, they talked about these activities with little mention of the dis-benefits they experienced or which potentially attached to their practices, such as their susceptibility to injuries—for example stress fractures, muscle strains, ligament damage—the tiredness that long hours of training can induce, or psychosomatic illnesses associated with endurance sports such as anorexia and obsessive-compulsive disorders. Nor did they comment on problems associated with sport such as cheating, corruption and over-aggression or articulate regrets that they had less time for friends, and other leisure pursuits.

On the rare occasion that sickness was touched on by a manager it was to articulate the view that “An Ironman cannot be off sick, it is simply not possible” (#16). Such comments symptomize the extent to which our interviewees were colonized by a logic of self-exploitation that Fleming (2012: 209) describes as “parasitical” and Skrabanek (1994) characterizes as a situation in which “The pursuit of health is a symptom of unhealth.” The seeming reluctance of managers to discuss the negative implications of a calculative rationality on the healthy body must also be understood in the context of the intensely disciplined and surveilled spaces they inhabited, such as their athletics clubs, work contexts, and marathon finishers linked-in web site. Subject to the panoptic gaze of their endurance sports communities and work colleagues there was a requirement to avoid the appearance of failure and to meet exacting standards or risk embarrassment, being stigmatized as weak, or regarded as a failure or a hypocrite. That is, managers subjectivities were shaped not merely by programs of government that operated at a distance, but also by more intimate and intrusive processes of surveillance associated with disciplinary power.

### *Limitations and future research*

Our study has several limitations that also provide opportunities for future research and theorizing. The data on which our analysis is based are drawn from a specific sample of mostly male middle-aged French managers, and research on other groups drawn from diverse cultural contexts with different demographic characteristics may be revealing. Governmental analysis of the kind employed

here is best “regarded as part of an analytical toolbox,” and while it has proved useful to study “subjectivity being formed within. . .mundane practices” (Rose et al., 2006: 100–101), other (non-Foucauldian) frameworks may also be theoretically generative. Importantly, governmentality is never fixed but always evolving and constantly modifying, involving continuous processes of “. . .convincing the subject that this is the way the game is currently played” (Weidner, 2009: 406). This is an opportunity for further, indeed ongoing research to explore whether and if so, how healthism is gaining traction among organizational participants, in which settings and with what consequences.

## Conclusion

Our study provides an example of how in neoliberalism, by drawing on the discourses and practices of competitive endurance sports managers constituted their selves entrepreneurially, as individuals in which “capital. . .is inseparable from the person who possesses it” (Foucault, 2008 [1978–9]: 224). This led managers to constitute their identities as “heroic leaders” (Allison et al., 2017; Gabriel, 1997; Manz and Sims, 1991; Villette and Vuillermot, 2009; Wilkins et al., 1990) through self-disciplinary practices (technologies of the self) that were not prescribed by their employer organizations but for which individuals themselves took personal responsibility. The identities they claimed were individualistic, performance-oriented, quantifiable, aspirational, stereotypically masculine, and placed a premium on strength, stamina, and competitiveness (Kerfoot and Knights, 1998). These fabrications hinted at fantasies of possessing superior life abilities with supposedly limitless potential (Ekman, 2013) echoing and sustaining contemporary societal discourses that describe business leaders as heroes and role models to be aspired to (e.g. Allison et al., 2017; Manz and Sims, 1991; Wilkins et al., 1990).

The managers who participated in this research were complicit in the control, screening and improvement of their human capital, intent on fashioning themselves in ways that were not just to their satisfaction but which served the requirements of markets, that is as physically robust role models who were *inter alia* prepared to work long hours without a break, and to tolerate stressful work situations. The pursuit of these desired identities was unending and arguably self-defeating: never could they fully realize the heroic leader identities they yearned for. Such is the effectiveness of neoliberal discourses, and why it is important continuously “. . .to challenge healthist assumptions and contradictions that contribute to the perpetuation of health as an individual duty” (Rose, 2007: 82).

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## Notes

1. In this paper, identities are conceived as “the meanings that individuals attach reflexively to themselves” (Brown, 2015: 23); the disputed term *self* is employed here to describe a capacity for reflexive thinking that is associated with a personal awareness of continuity; “subjectivity” refers to people’s experiences of the world, how they agentically interact with and are cognizant of who they and others are, and how these experiences are shaped by economic, political, and communitarian organizations.
2. We recognize and do not endorse the gendered use of “he,” “his,” and “him” in quotes from Foucault in our manuscript.
3. A marathon is a long-distance running race of 26 miles 385 yards (42.195 km). An ultramarathon, also called ultra-distance or ultra-running, is any foot race longer than the traditional marathon. A triathlon is an athletic contest consisting of three different events, typically swimming, cycling, and long-distance running. An ironman is a multi-event sporting contest demanding stamina, in particular a consecutive triathlon of swimming, cycling, and running.
4. While most managers spoke both about how they self-examined and self-transformed there were differences between individuals, some of whom focused more on the importance of self-examination while others devoted more talk to the importance of self-transformation.

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