

Physical Culture

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1. Introduction

Johnston and Klandermans [1] (p. 3) reflect that “culture is a broad and often imprecise term but, as others have noted, at the same time intuitively apparent”. This combination of conceptual imprecision and lived intuitiveness is partly what gives rise to ambiguity around the very notion of culture—we all know it is there and somehow important, but we also often struggle to articulate precisely what the term means. Such ambiguity is also at least as prevalent when dealing with the idea of *physical culture*, which is an often-used term to describe a phenomenon of sociological, anthropological, historical, and philosophical interest [2–13]. Across these diverse bodies of literature, ambiguity is sustained in part because of dual usage of the term physical culture in both academic and popular literature. While both are relevant, they carry important nuances in meaning and indicate a different aspect of focus, depending on the reading of the word *culture*. In what follows, I expand a little on these nuances.

2. Physical Culture as Clusters of Deliberative Cultivation of and through the Physical

The first of these interpretations might be described as deriving from an *emic* perspective, that is, the way in which participants have used the term physical culture to describe their own cultures of movement. This perspective draws its meaning from the earliest etymology of the original sense of the word ‘culture’. In English, this meaning is thought to have emerged in 16th Century Middle English and originally referred to the ‘cultivation of the soil’. The idea of cultivation came via French (*culturer*), which is itself derived from the Latin terms ‘*cultura/culturare/colere*’ and refers to ‘tending or cultivating’ connoting the nurturing of the biological properties of something.

The idea of physical culture as cultivation of and through the physical was adopted more as a noun (i.e., ‘a’ physical culture) to describe the many ‘cultivating’ movements that emerged across Europe and the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This interpretation is also widely used in the sociohistorical literature. Indeed, Hargreaves and Vertinsky [2] (p. 2) point out, in their important book *Physical Culture, Power, and the Body*, their focus on physical culture is “a preoccupation with the body, a cultivation of the body, by means of motor activity”. They continue: “by physical culture we are referring to those activities where the body itself—its anatomy, its physicality, and importantly its forms of movement—is the very purpose, the *raison d’être* of the activity.” [2] (p. 1). This interpretation also reappears in more recent scholarship. For example, Lishunter et al. [3] (ix) elucidate that the term physical culture:

has been revived amongst scholars and today includes various informal forms of movement associated with play, recreation and leisure, as well as the formalised systems of movement and movement education found in dance, physical education, sport and university courses in human movement.

This idea of physical culture also needs disambiguating from the idea of sport in its modern structural sense. A useful way of approaching this is through Storm’s [14] Luhmanian analysis, which suggests “sport as a social system operationalizes its media (winning) through a binary code

improvement/disimprovement in conjunction with a winning/losing code" (p. 112). Thus, while it is perfectly reasonable to talk of *sports culture*, this will necessarily need to be done with the understanding that sports cultures will emerge from the unquestioned foundations of the structural coupling of improvement/disimprovement with winning/losing codes. By contrast, *physical culture* might be differentiated from this structural coupling by way of its absence, questioning of, or resistance to, this taken-for-granted structural coupling. Thus, there may be overlap with sport being part of physical cultures, sport evolving from physical cultures, and physical cultures evolving from sport. Nevertheless, from a physical culture perspective, winning is never the only thing, and the improvement/disimprovement code usually identifies other kinds of human achievement as equally or even more important.

Physical cultures are often composites (re)constructed from a variety of pre-existing practices ranging from traditional pastimes to calisthenics, weightlifting, sport, gymnastics, military exercise, and dance and tend to have a particular cultivating purpose in mind. While in a definitional sense, physical cultures are primarily about the cultivation of the body, its purpose usually extends to the cultivation of valued cultural values *through* the body. Creators of physical cultures understood intuitively that cultivation through the physical medium was a very powerful way of delivering cherished social and cultural values, beliefs, and feelings. These properties typically included aspects such as improved moral compass, idealised notions of health, fitness, lifestyle, and establishing a sense of individual and collective identity. Each of these, of course, were and still are, coloured by the particular nexus of social, economic, political, gendered, and ethnic dynamics in the time and place which they were propagated. There are some widely documented examples in history, including Muscular Christianity, Eugene Sandow's Institutes of Physical Culture, the Swedish 'Ling' System, and the German Turnverein movement. In the modern era, physical cultures continue to be created with contemporary examples, including Parcour, Crossfit, and Nordic walking.

Many of the interpretations of physical cultures as body–mind cultivating practices share similarities with the definition of social movements which Barkan [15] describes as "an organized effort by a large number of people to bring about or impede social, political, economic, or cultural change" (p. 2696). Physical cultures sometimes align in interesting ways with social movement culture in the sense outlined by Johnston and Klandermans [1] (p. 4):

Social movements not only can arise from cracks in culture but also can process culture insofar as they consume what is culturally given and produce transmutations of it. The individuals, groups, and organizations that form a movement process culture by adding, changing, reconstructing, and reformulating. Like other aspects of the society that a movement is embedded in, culture is processed through construction of meaning. Questions about meaning construction relate to the processes by which culture is adapted, framed, and reframed through public discourse, persuasive communication, consciousness raising, political symbols, and icons.

some of the most prominent physical cultures have operated more like 'special interest groups' working within and supported by a social-political system in order to reinforce or improve it.

Possibly the most powerful example of this latter point was the Soviet vision of physical culture. As Grant [4] (p. 725) points out, "Lenin saw physical culture as a core component and methodology for developing the communist idea of *vospitanie*". Grant clarifies that, *Vospitanie* does not translate directly into English, but rather, "it means more than just education (which is '*obrazovanie*') and refers to upbringing, habits, mores" (p. 732). In particular, it exposes the belief that political and moral character of an individual could be shaped through particular physical practices. As Grant expands: "physical culture, even during the very early years of Bolshevik power, was on its way to becoming a vast ideological machine that would produce physically ideal and robust Soviet citizens" [4] (p. 726). A similar focus emerged in socialist Yugoslavia following the Second World War, with Mills [5] (p. 731) reporting that "after liberation, the new physical culture—heavily inspired by Soviet practice—became a cornerstone of efforts to educate the population and achieve the objectives of the revolution".

Physical Cultures sometimes have been created through the efforts of individuals who emerged at particular moments in history when there was a perceived social crisis and who were seen to have responded to that perceived crisis of legitimacy or functionality of the prevailing social order. Following Weber and Eisenstadt [18], we are reminded how such individuals have often been accorded the status of being charismatic leaders for the ways in which their responses to the problem were seen as salvational and attracted followers to their proposed solutions. These individuals may be located inside or outside of prevailing social-political orders. An example of someone from within the social system who sought to ameliorate that system is provided by the early twentieth century French military educator George Herbert, who coined the phrase '*être fort pour être utile*' and developed '*Herbertisme*' [19], a system of military physical education designed to enhance physical capacity as well as develop courage and positive morality (something he considered was lacking in French society and in military training at the time). '*La méthode naturelle*', as it was also referred to, involved combat training, climbing, walking, running, jumping, swimming, moving on hands and feet, balancing, throwing, lifting, and all of these ideally occurring in the natural environment. Its modality was often to complete a pre-set course that included these activities to varying degrees of difficulty, and this came to be seen as one of the first types of obstacle/assault course training, now so widely used in military training. Moreover, it is also widely seen as the precursor to the modern form of '*le parcours*' (Parkour), developed later by other charismatic figures (Raymond and David Belle) in the 1980s [20], which has itself further evolved into freerunning, spearheaded by yet another charismatic leader, Sebastian Foucan [21]. The significance of charismatic leadership in shaping physical cultures is highlighted in this Special Edition, by Matteo Di Placido [22], who provides an analysis of a modern denominational yoga ashram set up and led by a much-respected Guru in Europe and the forms of spiritual capital developed through these physical cultural practices.

As with the above examples, many of the original physical cultures continue to evolve and, in many cases, have become absorbed into mainstream cultural practice by retaining some of their original values and adding new ones. An example of this is provided by Atkinson [23], whose study of Parkour suggests it has added a significant component of environmental awareness, while at the same time becoming a popularised activity. Another example is that of *Friluftsliv* (pronounced free-lufts-leav), an old Scandinavian idea that came to prominence in the mid-19th century when it was advocated by the influential Norwegian playwright and poet Henrik Ibsen in the 1850s. Literally translating the idea as "free air life", Gelter [24] (p. 78) describes *Friluftsliv* as "a philosophical lifestyle based on experiences of the freedom in nature and the spiritual connectedness with the landscape. The reward of this connectedness with the landscape is this strong sensation of a new level of consciousness and a spiritual wholeness" [24] (p. 78). *Friluftsliv* can be appropriated into English as 'open air living'. The term conveys the perceived importance for physical and spiritual wellbeing of being (active) in remote natural locations. As such, it has become a widespread practice in Scandinavian culture and has become connected with many aspects of it, including Arne Naess's philosophy of deep ecology,

programmes of outdoor education, and also has become part of a social discourse as a physical cultural practice that provides “a social experience that many people in our urban secularized lives are missing” [24] (p. 89). In this Edition, Antonio Camorrino [25] provides a critical analysis of physical culture and green spirituality highlighting how imaginaries of a sacralised nature increasingly feed into the reinvention of interpretations of nature and wilderness as a transcendent entity to come into resonance with, by those engaging in various extreme and meditative sports around the world.

There is one further categorical example of a physical culture that is represented by a number of articles in this Special Edition, the martial arts. This is no coincidence; the martial arts are exemplars of the emic interpretation of physical culture described here, where the cultivation of qualities of and through the physical is central to the culture and deliberative in its pursuit. The martial arts have some of the longest documented histories as organised physical cultures, with Eastern arts like the Korean Taekkyon (c. 50 BCE), Indian Kalaripayattu (c. 1000 BCE), and Chinese Shuai Jiao (c. 2697 BCE), and Western arts such as Greek Pankration (c. 2000 BCE), Sumerian Boxing (evidenced to c. 3000 BCE), and Greek wrestling (c. 708 BCE). Many martial arts have evolved to become transmitters of a range of valued cultural beliefs and practices. For example, as Zarrilli [26] documents, the art of Kalaripayattu contains a rich array of elements of Indian culture added over the course of its evolution and includes such aspects as ayurveda, yoga sutra and Nata dance. Similarly, Alter’s [27] social anthropological work on wrestling in Northern India is a testimony to the complex interweaving of nationalism and moral reform through the physical cultural practice of Indian wrestling. The ethnographic article in this Edition by George Jennings [28] highlights a similar effort by those leading Mexican Xilam to engender cultural renewal through re-establishing a range of practices that foster awareness on Mesoamerican warrior culture, spirituality, and language. In a similar vein, Martin Meyer and Heiko Bittmann’s [29] paper addresses the similarities and differences in motivations to train in Karate between Japanese and German practitioners. They highlight that practitioner motives are flexible and shift according to both cultural context and individual biography.

Many physical cultures continue, and new ones are emerging in the early 21st century, in what Appadurai [30] refers to as an increasingly de-territorialised world. Moreover, whether new, reinvented or continuous, these physical cultures still reflect their era, and the ethno, techno, media, finance and ideo ‘scapes’ in which they emerge and evolve. Some are politicised, others commercialised, and some appear have no overt political, cultural intentions for altruistic social change other than the promotion of themselves on the basis of their particular expression of the joy and passion for what Huizinga [31] describes as a need for *homo ludens*. Most physical cultures however, are an amalgam of these elements. Transposing Ford and Brown’s [32] point on surfing styles, physical cultures tend to reflect the zeitgeist of their time. Accordingly, at this juncture, it is difficult to conduct any analysis of contemporary physical cultures without reference to the pervasive influences or ‘flows’ of our time such as reflexive modernisation, post-modernisation, globalisation, glocalisation, Neo-liberal capitalism, nationalism, consumerism, meritocratic individualism, and religion. Similarly, analyses must also account for the unintended negative consequences of many of these social forces, such as environmental destruction, climate change, terrorism, the wealth gap, refugees, and pandemic health issues such as bacterial resistance, mental health, and noncommunicable diseases (especially cancer, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes). In this Edition, the article by Óscar DelCastillo-Andrés María Teresa Toronjo-Urquiza, Javier Cachón Zagalaz, and María del Carmen Campos-Mesa [33] highlights precisely the influence of these flows on physical cultures. Their report on the construction of adapted Judo explains how the martial art of Judo is being adapted in ways which help to address the broader social problem of quality of life in older adult populations, by addressing how the physical practice of Judo adapted specifically for older populations can alleviate the problems of falling and the fear of falling.

3. Physical Culture as Physicalised Aspects of Culture

The second, *etic* sense is more readily attributable to a contemporary social science, with pioneering sociologists such as Simmel, Durkheim, Weber, and Adorno all observing a growing

sense of difference between collective behaviours of different groups of people emerging along the rapid changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution across Europe. In this way, the term culture took on a more sociological meaning, which is captured nicely by Kroeber and Kluckhohn's [34] (p. 181) now often cited description:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour, acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of action.

The importance increasingly attached to culture is reflected in the contemporary development of many sub-discipline areas in the social sciences, including cultural anthropology, cultural sociology, cultural studies, cultural psychology, cultural semiotics, and cultural linguistics. Increasingly, these more specialised approaches to culture have come to better understand how culture is transmitted with and through the physical medium in the form of patterns of practice and interaction between and amongst human groups. Along with this development, culture comes to be seen as fundamentally embodied [35,36], and along with this, the etic idea of physical culture takes on a meaning that might be summarised as *physicalised aspects of cultures* (as opposed to more complete physical cultures in their own right). The nuance is important because it gives way to a very much broader focus on physical aspects of everyday culture as well as discrete physical cultures, and conversely, it also allows a focus on the minutiae of cultural phenomena that become embodied in and through physical cultural practices and their semiotic and linguistic representations. This etic sense of physical culture is captured by Ingham [6], who points out that "all of us share genetically endowed bodies, but to talk about physical culture requires that we try to understand how the genetically endowed is socially constituted or socially constructed, as well as socially constituting and constructing" (p. 176). The significance of Ingham's view of physical culture also reveals its often-underlying constructionist epistemology: That physical culture constructs, shapes, and 'finishes' bodies [36]. This perspective is extended by Andrews [7] (p. 56):

Physical culture represents a 'pressure point of complex modern societies' (Frow & Morris, 2000, p. 352). It is a 'site' or 'point of intersection, and of negotiation of radically different kinds of determination and semiosis,' a place where social forces, discourses, institutions, and processes congregate, congeal, and are contested in a manner which contributes to the shaping of human relations, experiences, and subjectivities... in particular, contextually contingent ways.

As highlighted earlier, physical culture, like social movement culture, is often countenanced around the idea of social change and specific cultures, and their advocates have frequently been identified as agents of change. This second sense of physical culture tends to posit that change is inexorable and thus continuous, as a driver for, a response to, and a reflection of, broader societal change, as Silk and Andrews [8] (p. 9) articulate:

Physical culture can never be substantial (possessing some fixed, immutable essence). Rather, it is unavoidably relational, and always in process: its contemporaneous iteration providing a persuasive-if illusionary-semblance of fixity within what is, in actuality, an ever-changing world.

Physicalised aspects of culture are thus constantly in a state of what Elliot [37] refers to as reinvention. As Elliot contends the rise of consumer culture in particular, has meant the reinvention—through physicalised aspects of culture—of bodies, and persons is a constant, perpetual process echoing Heraclitus' paradoxical sense of change being an immutable quality of existence [38].

However, I want to draw attention back to two important and, in my view, still underdeveloped elements of the term physical culture hinted at above, which is the articulation of the seemingly ineffable—the experiential and practical significance of bodily movement as/in culture and what Levi-Strauss [39] famously refers to as the ‘floating signifiers’ that emerge from such movement experiences. Giardina and Newman [9] phrase this as follows: “‘physical culture’ for us is constituted by, and constitutive of movements both in the local bodily kinetic sense and in the broader political shifts and power relations the human body brings to life” (p. 41).

Giardina and Newman express a widely held view that physical culture is itself formed, transmitted, changed, and reproduced by *bodies in movement*. Such a view is, however, suggestive of something more than the ontological prioritisation given to constructionist perspectives of physical culture. According to Massumi [40], bodily movement and sensation displace ontological primacy with an ontogenetic view which refuses binary classification of such as aspects of nature/culture, body/thought, concrete/abstract, animate/inanimate, literal/figural, passage/position, and being/becoming, amongst many others. From this perspective (and placing aside the many reasonable criticisms and concerns around what is ‘new’ about the term new materialism often attached to such views [41–43]), all forms of physical movement in some way receive, transmit, and (re)form culture *in a process of becoming*. As Massumi [40] (p. 1) articulates, bodily movement affects us and is thus fundamental to physical cultural change. Further, he asserts that, fundamentally, “Body – (movement/sensation)-change” is a continual process of change through becoming and emergence. Therefore, physical culture in the second sense defined here allows us to focus more specifically on what Massumi terms the “field of emergence” and of “pure” sociality:

The idea is that there is an ontogenesis or becoming of culture and the social (bracketing for present purposes the difference between them), of which determinate forms of culture and sociability are the result. The challenge is to think that process of formation, and for that you need the notion of a taking-form, an inform on the way to being determinately this or that. The field of emergence is not presocial. It is open-endedly social. It is social in a manner “prior to” the separating out of individuals and the identifiable groupings that they end up boxing themselves into (positions in gridlock). A sociality without determinate borders: “pure” sociality. One of the things that the dimension of emergence is ontogenetically “prior to” is thus the very distinction between the individual and the collective, as well as any given model of their interaction. That interaction is precisely what takes form. That is what is socially determined-and renegotiated by each and every cultural act. [40] (p. 9)

Massumi’s point opens manifold possibilities to broaden our enquiry into history and processes of change in physical culture by distinguishing between, on the one hand, “conditions of emergence” which “are one with becoming” and, on the other, “re-conditionings of the emerged” which “define normative or regulatory operations that set the parameters of history”. Becoming and history become another binary to be overcome:

History is inseparably, ontogenetically different from becoming. But if feedback from the dimension of the emerged re-conditions the conditions of emergence, then it also has to be recognized that conditions of emergence change. Emergence emerges. Changing changes. If history has a becoming from which it is inseparably, ontogenetically different, then conversely becoming has a history. [40] (p. 10)

Massumi’s implosion of sociocultural binaries through the idea of body-movement-affects-sensation-change also suggests a challenge to another important dichotomy that has long entertained the sociological imaginations of scholars of physical culture—that of agency and structure and, more importantly, ‘the problem of agency’. Indeed, there are some striking similarities in the conclusions of Varela [44] (p. 321) with Massumi’s argument when he summarises:

The essence of human existence is freedom: voluntarism is personal agency ... personal agency is an emergent case of agent causality—self-movement in nature ... the agency

(potentials: possibilities) of the person (agent: thing: substance) is the (causal) power(s) of action.

When read like Massumi's field of emergence, as not precocial but open-endedly social (as all bodies in movement play a part in affecting conditions of emergence), bodies in movement gives renewed attention to notions of human agency which only emerge in relation to the conditions in which movement occurs, being affected by and affecting the structured and structuring cultural practices we engage in. This adds detail to the structurationist thinker Sewell [45] (p. 3) pointing that "structures shape peoples' practices, but it is also peoples' practices that constitute (and reproduce) structures". Following Wetherell [46] (p. 147), it is therefore useful to think of these practices occurring in physical culture as physicalised forms of *affective practice*:

Practice theories suggest that affective activity is a field of open and flexible patterns. The order in these patterns is emergent from the changing interrelationships and entanglements between the constituent social, cultural, biological and material parts of the broader field. Affective activity is an ongoing flow (a 'poly-phony' according to Damasio, 1999) of forming and changing body-scapes, qualia (subjective states), and actions constantly shifting in response to the changing context. This flow can be categorized, interpreted and parsed in a huge range of subtle and not so subtle ways.

Focusing on the physicalised aspects of culture reveals the many isomorphic properties of broader cultural contexts and their deep sensorial *affects* on individuals. Moreover, it allows us to revisit, in a nonbinary way, the many processes and practices which move and affect us and how, through our collective movements, we shape culture at the same time as it shapes us. Physical culture has the potential to generate affects which are greater than the sum of its parts through what Mellor and Shilling [47] refer to as *sensual solidarities*—emergent affective bonds of co-experienced physicality that tie people together and also divide them, willingly and unwillingly, knowingly and unknowingly, in the matrix of a changing social order. In this Special Edition, three articles highlight this: Valeria Varea, Gustavo González-Calvo, and Lucio Martínez-Álvarez's [48] article exemplifies affective practice in operation when they identify the increasingly restrictive societal attitudes regarding interpersonal 'touch' and how these attitudes impact on the teaching practices and experiences in Physical Education in Latin cultures, where touch is/was a positive embedded feature of cultural body idiom. James Southwood and Sara Delamont's [49] article draws on Urry's [50] 'mobilities' paradigm to inform their symbolic interactionist ethnography of British Savate classes. Invoking nine categories of movement including bodies, memories, places, and objects, their article highlights the need for a more refined sensitivity towards the significance of movement in the emergence of physical culture. Lorenzo Domaneschi's [51] article analyses how specific *affective* cultural practices with martial arts weapons facilitate movement-sensation and change in ways that are only possible through the intimate experience of harmonising one's own movement with the movement of a weapon. This creates a field of emergence that serves as an affective source for collective sensual solidarity and identity within Wushu kung fu.

Viewing physical culture as comprising affective practices can facilitate our understanding of traditional orders and their reinvention through the movement of bodies, but it can also provide the catalyst for deliberative, orchestrated social change as well, uniting people in their pursuit of something different, something that challenges and forces change through channelling what Barnwell [52] refers to as a Durkheimian sense of affect articulated as *collective effervescence*. Again, this reminds of us of the pure sociality of movement and how its *affects* are often much larger and more forceful than sum of each individual—in short, physical culture generates pure sociality through what Barnwell [52] terms *collective agency*. Thus, while physical culture can be a zone of emergence for collective effervescence, 'pure' sociality, agency, and sensual solidarity can also provide for the emergence of a collective sensual relation of difference. In short, we are both brought together and pushed apart by the physicalised cultural practices that move us and, through our movements, we act back on culture. In this Edition,