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## Contemporary physical activities: the aesthetic justification

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### ABSTRACT

The customary view of today's recreational physical activities turns the human movement into a rational practice that is pursued for practical reasons only: for health, vitality, stamina and longevity. This prevalent point of view affects the understanding of the ends, content and quality of physical activities and it creates a bias where the biological, physiological and medical characteristics of physical activities are emphasized while the sensuous, experiential and creative aspects are suppressed. This results in a partial understanding about the significance of human movement in contemporary culture. The article analyses the reasons for this distorted view of physical activity and formulates a rationale for the aesthetic justification for the contemporary way of being active. In addition, the article explores on the role of the (aesthetic) experience in contemporary physical activities as well as examines the possibilities of change the aesthetic justification can provide the physical activity.

### Introduction

My everyday physical activity is distance running. When I am running through a landscape, be it urban or rural, I feel that I am engaged in an aesthetic activity. I can enjoy the environment visually as well as hearing and smelling it. I can feel the warmth of the sun or the sting of the freezing wind. I feel my feet working rhythmically and I can feel the structure of the ground through the thin soles of my shoes. I feel my heart pounding and my lungs gasping in air. I can feel my clothes moving against my sweating skin. I do not think much, but my senses are open, and I often have a good time.

When I read popular articles about sport or discuss doing recreational physical activity with other hobbyist participants, I notice mentions of the aesthetic qualities of the activity, but they are mainly just passing remarks of feelings, experiences and environment. Even though people actively participating in physical activities seem to enjoy exertion in an aesthetic manner, they do not express it directly, but in a hidden, indirect way. Instead, the emphasis is on other aspects of the activity; there is plenty of talk about distances, heart rates, speed, calories, health benefits, results, rankings and progress. Most of them are things you can quantify or reduce to statistics. It seems that the enjoyment is treated

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as just a side-effect of physical activity, while its work-like and health-related qualities are appreciated as a reason for movement. There must be some reason why the sensuous and aesthetic in sport and other physical activities are not valued as a justification for being active or expressed as a reason for activity.

The promotion and justification of today's mainstream recreational physical activity is done in a manner that turns human movement into a rational practice that is pursued for practical reasons only: to become or stay healthy, for vitality, stamina and longevity. These are also the arguments the national authorities both in my native Finland and elsewhere in affluent countries use to persuade inactive people to exercise. For instance, a statement by the National Sport Council in Finland before municipal elections in 2017 emphasized the rational health-related and economic justifications for being active (Valtion liikuntaneuvosto 3. Mar 2017). Using this type of rhetoric affects the understanding of the ends, content and quality of physical activities. My argument is that it has created a bias where the biological, physiological and medical characteristics of physical activities are emphasized, and the sensuous, experiential and creative aspects present in them are suppressed. Focusing on physical well-being and social utility in physical activity has beneficial effects, but it obscures other advantageous aspects of it. The result is partial understanding about the significance of human movement in contemporary culture.

However, embracing the subjective experiences and taking into account their aesthetic quality expands the meaning of the physical activities. Recognising the importance of experience is assisted by taking into account some recent developments in aesthetics: firstly, the scope of contemporary aesthetics has expanded beyond art and artistic (Welsch 1997); and secondly, the recent development of pragmatist aesthetics has introduced individual experience as the origin of aesthetic analysis (Shusterman 1997). Acknowledging the aesthetic aspects of physical activity produces new connotations for it (e.g. Martin 2008) and can consequently make it meaningful and attractive in a novel way both for those who are already active and those who are passive because they find the current ideals of physical activity discouraging.

The distorted understanding of physical activity can be traced to various origins. One, and perhaps the most important source, can be linked back to the emergence of modern physical practices in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The ideals that were present during the development of German gymnastics and modern sport in England still influence understanding of physical activity in the twenty-first century (Pfister 2003). The second significant reason for the biased conception of physical activity is the hegemony of modern achievement-oriented and competitive sport over other physical practices during the twentieth century. The quantified objectives of sport assisted the development of scientific coaching and sport sciences that employ methods borrowed from natural sciences for improving measurable sporting results. The resulting conception of humans as machine-like beings is still apparent in contemporary physical activities.

In order to illustrate the consequences of the described biased conception, this article examines the field of contemporary physical activities by analysing the historical origin of various justifications for physical activity and the relations between contemporary aesthetics and physical activity. The analysis of those justifications shows the impact of early conceptions on the understanding of physical activity today as well as how the justifications affect actual practices. The exploration of relations between physical activities and aesthetics provides a new perspective on the condition of physical activity in contemporary culture.

The resulting presentation of the current situation reveals how the field of physical activity is detaching from its legacy and how various physical traditions have recently been intertwined, forming a new concept of human movement.

### **Current landscape of physical activities**

In affluent western societies, participation in physical activities has become enormously popular and at the same time more personally adjustable than ever before. There are more activities to choose from and more individual flexibility to determine the content of activities. When current physical activity is observed from a distance, achievement-oriented sport seems to define the field. Closer analysis shows that contemporary physical activities have largely departed from this tradition. The shift has been hard to see because of the dominance of sport: the variety of physical activities have been interpreted through the concept sport. Assessing activities through sport-related concepts – achievement and (personal) records, constantly measuring the performance and the use of terminology inherited from sporting tradition – tends to obscure other relevant approaches to physical activity. In addition, the organizational structure established to support sport has an impact on understanding aspects of contemporary physical activities.

However, if competitive, elite and professional sport practices are left aside, the landscape of contemporary physical activities changes: instead of unity, there is a plurality. Instead of one culture of sport, there are various approaches to human movement. Moreover, the boundaries between practices have become fluid, allowing movement between different physical traditions as well as the emergence of different objectives and inclinations within existing practices (Kreft 2008; Tainio 2015). Even though sport is still the dominant format for various hobbyist activities and exercise, it is not leading their development. Diverse practices descending from other modern physical activities as well as practices adopted from outside western culture play an important part in the development of everyday physical activities. In addition, recent lifestyle activities with *post-sport* orientation have brought new ideas to the contemporary landscape of physical activity. Parkour and skateboarding are typical examples of these activities, but similar post-sport orientation can be found in more traditional sports (Atkinson 2010a). Together, these various approaches shape the current concept of physical activity and give new meanings to it (Tainio 2015).

### ***Transformation of physical activities: the shift away from the hegemony of sport***

Today, physical activity is a significant part of the contemporary lifestyle, but only a few decades ago the situation was rather different: even though the emergence of sport made physical activity a culturally and socially important part of life in western cultures during the early twentieth century, for most of the century a physically active lifestyle was not a widespread phenomenon in affluent western societies. The emergence of a different, more active lifestyle began during the 1960s and the real turning point took place in the seventies along with the development of jogging and the first running boom.

The development of jogging exemplifies the subtle change. The basic physical practice did not transform, but the shift in the concept of physical activity was significant. (Latham 2013) Although jogging was developed to improve health, it had unpredictable effects on contemporary physical activities: jogging formed a model for later self-directed exercise practices

as well as a model of the free social organization of individuals engaged in the same physical practice: the joggers formed a tribe. In addition to this, jogging provided stimulation for the idea of using creativity in the context of a physical practice by encouraging joggers to employ public space, streets and parks for their exercise. Physical activity does not have to be confined to special spaces, but can make use of urban space and be visible to others. Furthermore, this transformation made it possible to see physical activity as a personal expressive act: exercise that was not confined by rigid rules could be used for physically exploring personal potentials and inclinations. The free-form organization of jogging can be seen as a forerunner of today's physical practices with a rhizomatic structure, lacking an obvious centre or leader, an official organization or structure (Daskalaki and Mould 2013).

### ***Contemporary standardization of movement: aerobics and the development of commercial physical activities***

Another significant trend in the field of contemporary physical activities is the industrialized development of fitness programmes. The modern fitness industry has existed since the early twentieth century (Featherstone 1995), but it did not become mainstream until the 1980s, when aerobics experienced a boom after Jane Fonda started to promote her exercise system by selling the instructions on video tapes (Markula 1995). Since aerobics, similar supervised exercise programs have evolved under various trademarks (Parviainen 2011).

Despite the commercial priorities, heavy standardization (Parviainen 2011) and the limited conception of an ideal body, these fitness programs have induced a significant transformation in women's physical activity. Aerobics classes became a site where being sweaty and out of breath is approved. Even though the body image promoted in contemporary fitness classes is limited, they have expanded the standards for female bodies: being thin is not the only approved option; one can be also 'toned' or even muscular (Markula 1995).

### ***Focus on experiences: post-sport practices***

The emergence of post-sport practices into the mainstream forms the third major shift that has contributed to the transformation from modern sport toward the current field of physical activity (Wheaton 2004). While giving less importance to quantifying the activity, post-sport practices emphasize creativity, a playful attitude and exploration of the environment through physical activity. The concept of achievement and the quest for excellence are present in post-sport activities, but instead of quantified figures they are seen as personal improvement that cannot be compared with the development of others. In addition, achieving excellence requires a creative contribution. In order to combine creativity and achievement, the attitude toward standardization and rules differs from that of sport. Practising post-sports involves an imperative of creativity; it is not possible to excel by copying others, one has to develop something original to reach excellence (Beal 1995).

### ***The substance of physical activities***

Unlike art, modern physical activities are not valued for themselves. Since the emergence of modern physical activities in the early nineteenth century, they have been connected to various aims external to the practice itself, in order to justify the time and energy spent.

The most common justifications employed morally based arguments that connected physical activity with health, character-building (e.g. manliness), becoming a proper citizen, nationalism and later preparation for the demands of working life. In addition, physical activities have been seen as a form of education and thus able to improve resilience and operate as a means of personal transformation. These arguments were common in both nineteenth century German gymnastics and English sport, and traces of them can still be found in contemporary sporting and exercise practices (Pfister 2003).

Today, the dominant justification of regular exercise is health benefits (Eichberg and Loland 2009). This is used to validate the majority of activities, exercise programmes and dietary choices. Although health was a significant paradigm in all modern physical activities, it has become a more important validation of physical activity since the late twentieth century (O'Donovan et al. 2010), as the other justifications associated with physical activity (manliness, discipline, morality and nationalism) have lost their value as a consequence of social changes during the last decades of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the rise of contemporary recreational exercise practices has eroded the values previously connected with organized physical activities (Atkinson 2010b).

The justifications used in the promotion and validation of physical activity influence its content as well as build its meanings; while the conventional justifications promote the beneficial effects of exercise, they also suggest a narrow model for understanding human movement leaving little margin for individual variation. Emphasizing some aspects and benefits of an activity obscure others that promote other kinds of consequences. Both the emphasized and concealed aspects of sport can be beneficial, but advocate different values.

During recent decades, experience has developed into an important objective and content of physical activity. The idea of an experience as a yardstick for an activity arose first in connection with post-sport activities, which took a more adventurous and risk-taking attitude toward physical activity than previous practices. Moreover, these activities were not guided by detailed rules and thus were more open to personal expression.

The approach emphasizing experiences forms a distinct departure from the old ideals and is today transforming the landscape of physical activities as a whole. This approach that originated within post-sports is adopted by participants of other, more traditional activities, thus contributing to separation of the ideals of modern sport (Atkinson 2010b; Wheaton 2010; Tainio 2015). The actual shift is hard to detect by observing the activities themselves; however, the phenomenon becomes visible in the social media presentations, where the exercises are shared in the form of photographs and written reports. These reports constantly focus on the experience and give less consideration to the results, fitness and health effects. Despite the interest in experiences, their content is mostly left unexplained; when the experiences and the excitement gained through an activity are reported, their quality usually remains unexplored. The reports can be detailed and accurate, but the analysis of experience seldom goes beyond the descriptive. Furthermore, the experiences and enjoyment are regularly explained as physio-biological phenomena (e.g. Boecker and Dishman 2015), where the activity is seen as a catalyst that triggers a biological event that produces certain bodily feelings and consequently enjoyment.

The existing justifications and promotional goals of physical activity do not explain why human movement is interesting and worth pursuing. Knowledge about the benefits of a physical activity for health or the development of personal qualities cannot be the only reason to engage in it. Certainly, activities are undertaken because of expectations of



becoming healthier, losing weight or gaining muscle, but are these reasons to pursue the activity in the long term? My view is that the activity must produce some other benefits that are not directly linked to the initial goals. The old justifications do not answer this. Here, the recent justification of activity through experiences and their aesthetic qualities gives a more promising starting point. Exploring the character of the experiences and the source of excitement through physical activity can reveal more complex reasons for being active: reasons that have an aesthetic character.

## **Aesthetics and physical activity**

The historical legacy and prevalent understanding about the meaning of physical activities explain the absence of the aesthetic in human movement. Even though experiences in physical activity have recently been emphasized, their connection with the aesthetic has not been elaborated. My question here is: how would the conception of physical activities change if its aesthetic aspects were deliberately given more emphasis? My view is that emphasizing the sensuous and aesthetic features in human movement would enhance the meaning of contemporary physical activities by expanding their framework outside the tradition of sport and fitness practices. The importance of physical, health and social benefits will not suffer from the wider perspective on physical activity; however, their meaning will gain new dimensions from the expanded view.

When aesthetics is understood in its contemporary sense as sensuous knowing instead of connecting it with the perceivable qualities of art and beauty, the discipline becomes an important vehicle for understanding the content of physical activity. Consequently, aesthetics can be connected with all the aspects that make physical activity attractive, interesting and worthwhile. From the aesthetic perspective, health is just a positive by-product of the activity, not the ultimate goal. The other established justifications for physical activity have even less importance. Aesthetics opens a view onto physical activity as part of a good life where the path travelled is more important than the goals promised and achieved.

## ***Aesthetic experience and physical activity***

In most cases, the aesthetic experience in contemporary physical activity is neglected – the experiences are presented as if a connection between the experience and the aesthetic would not exist. This can be seen in the manner physical activity is presented in social media. I follow various groups on Facebook connecting hobbyist athletes in Finland. The typical activity is sharing images and short reports about exercise, particularly when the experience has been a special one. These images can be landscapes picturing the site, anything between the great views or the wet snow, or they can be selfies showing exhaustion or the frosty gear after outdoor exercise in the Nordic winter. The verbalization of these Facebook postings do not describe the experience in depth, but express the feeling in the moment: ‘First jog this year! Finally, the weather wasn’t too freezing and even I could survive outside. However, the snowy landscape made my run’ (post in Facebook group Kestävyystä pintakaasulla 24/7 January 17 2016).

Even though the messages reveal little about the quality and content of the experience, they reveal the importance of the aesthetic enjoyment as part of the activity. However, employing rational reasons makes engaging in an activity more substantial than referring

to plain enjoyment. The descriptions often show signs of the traditional sport ethos by reporting the measured statistics of the exercise. People seem to enjoy the experiences for their aesthetic aspects, but still justify them through achievement and health.

As early as 1934, John Dewey advocated the connection between aesthetics and understanding the surrounding world, where the bodily connection with the world formed the basis for the aesthetic experience. For Dewey, the apex of aesthetic experience was art as an experience, not as a separate category ([1934] 2005). Contemporary studies see the connection between the aesthetic and the understanding of the surrounding world as even more solid and inescapable: the only way of perceiving the world is through our senses, thus the experiences always have an aesthetic nature.

For instance, German philosopher Wolfgang Iser sees that our understanding of the world is constructed through aesthetics: our senses operate as the only means of obtaining information about the world, and primary judgments about it are made by employing aesthetic means. The fundamental understanding of reality is based on aesthetic thinking, not immaterial processes of thought. Since all the solid foundations for absolute knowledge and moral choices that were previously provided by religion have been exhausted alongside the development of modern European culture, the aesthetic judgement of singular events is the only way to decide the correct action: the world as a whole is changeable, suspended and produced. It cannot be confined by a solid set of rules (1997).

The cognitive sciences support a similar view: George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have explored the bodily basis of our thinking and connected it with our sensorimotor experiences of the environment. According to them, even the most abstract ideas and subjective experiences are based on our physiology and the way it connects to the surrounding environment. 'Our concepts cannot be a direct reflection external, objective, mind-free reality because our sensorimotor system plays a crucial role in shaping them.' (1999, 44); our body and its senses inevitably define our conception of the world (ibid).

These views provide a new basis for the aesthetics of physical activity. It does not need to be related to the surface level, to beauty or artistic qualities, but to general awareness of the activity in all its dimensions: How is the activity felt? What kind of experiences does it produce? How does it change the way one experiences the world? What is the effect of the environment and company while physically active? Is it important what the activity looks like and how it matters? The sensuous connection between the moving body and its surrounding environment can be seen as the central subject matter when linking physical activities and aesthetics. Yet, this is not visible in the discourse about contemporary physical activities.

In the context of contemporary physical activities, employing the aesthetic experience opens the first person view onto a specific practice. Concentrating on personal aesthetic experiences makes it possible to recognize and analyse the multiple perspectives that are present and constantly changing in physical activity. The basic level of contact with the world is through the sensing body that feels the ground under the feet, the pounding heart, the air flowing into the lungs as well as the wind cooling the skin. This somatic level forms the foundation that affects all other levels of experience. It is also the level that is recognized when the bodily feelings in and after active movement are detected. Unlike the current manner of superficial commenting on experiences in movement and their mistaken recognition as just physiological reactions, this *somaesthetic* approach gives tools for the more refined analysis and practical study of physical activity in the context of applied aesthetics.



Awareness of the experience can be expanded from the direct corporeal experience in various directions. Firstly, there is the environmental experience that is constantly present in physical activity. Despite its presence, its role can vary from indifferent to crucial, depending on the practice. Engaging in a competitive activity does not shut off the environmental relation, even though it can dilute it. In a recreational activity, one can approach the environment consciously and observe it in a more detailed manner. There is no real reason why one could not stop to enjoy the scenery or smell the forest. However, many of the habits present in contemporary physical activity contribute to a muted connection with the experienced environment: wearing headphones during activity and exercising in a gym constructs a private environment that cannot be shared. On the other hand, there are activities that highlight the environmental context. Many outdoor activities search for novel ways to experience the urban environment: skateboarders look for new spots to explore the environment through the board; snowboarders build rideable features in parks and industrial areas in order to experience their activity in an environment; and running events are organized in the night in order to experience urban nightscapes (Tainio 2015).

When other people are involved in the activity, the aesthetic experience has a social dimension (Berleant 2005). The human companion or the human opponent affect the experience. When pursuing an activity with someone, the experience becomes shared, which can amplify highlights or smooth negative encounters (Kupfer 1983). An experience becomes better articulated through the process of sharing. On the other hand, a living opponent turns an activity in a more unpredictable direction, it becomes a drama. The outcome is uncertain even when the contest is a friendly one. The unpredictable nature of this kind of activity makes the aesthetic experience more complex (Kreft 2012).

The perspective of everyday aesthetics is also relevant when analysing the aesthetics in physical activities, especially in the context of recreational practices. Being physically active regularly forms a diversion from everyday tasks, but it is still part of everyday life. Involvement in physical activity adds to the everyday experiences. Kupfer (1983) links the benefit of physical activity to those everyday moments when one suddenly finds a connection to the best moments of physical activity when casually jumping over a puddle or gracefully slipping into an overcoat. These do not present the finest examples of human motion, but their connection to the experiences gained during physical activity enhances our appreciation of them.

The connection between the experiences of physical activity and everyday life also has other consequences. Anderson (2001) sees physical activity as a site of creativity that can reveal our human agency and shift the manner in which we act in our everyday life. This shift can take place even though one does not approach physical activity from an aesthetic perspective, but a conscious awareness of the sensuous aspects of activity makes it more probable. For both Kupfer and Anderson, the variation between everyday tasks and freedom in physical activity is key to the positive changes movement can generate.

### ***Play and good life***

Friedrich Schiller's ideas about the significance of aesthetics in human life can be used as a starting point for elaborating the positive consequences of an aesthetic view on physical activity.

Schiller ([1794] 1982) saw that the problem in his time was the dominance of *utility*: disproportionate interest in practical and measurable values leads to a partial life, which can be cured through aesthetic education. His remedy for the imbalance is *play*, which he suggests to be at the heart of humanity: 'he is only fully a human being when he plays' (107).

According to Schiller ([1794] 1982), two opposite forces, *drives*, affect human life. First, there is the *sensuous drive*, an inclination to focus on unique cases and their materiality and the change in the very moment. Second, there is the rational *formal drive*, visible in the concentration on utility and truth. Undue concentration on either makes the man incomplete. However, in the space expanding between the sensuous and formal drives resides the *play drive* that combines the best of sensuous and formal drives and limits their extremities. The play drive extends the qualities of the person further than concentration only on the formal or sensuous drive alone can. However, it is hard to find an equilibrium and maintain the play drive. The balance is always transient; there is tension that draws the person toward the extremities. The importance of play lies in its ability to connect the two other drives, make the person complete and open him/her up to the beauty of life: supporting the art of living and forming a foundation for the good life.

Contemporary scholars exploring aesthetics in sport and other physical activities have ended-up with similar conclusions, although in a narrower field: physical activity can form a significant part of a good life if it is understood as an aesthetic activity. Being physically active and free from everyday duties is regularly justified by its utilities, but the benefits can be more extensive when play element is included in the activity. To achieve this aim, undue seriousness and concentration on benefits external to the activity itself should be constrained. When an activity is found interesting and worthwhile, the enjoyment should be found in the activity itself, not through its external ends. Successfully balancing the utilitarian ends and free bodily enjoyment allows the play element to be manifested in an activity.

Richard Shusterman brings the body to the centre of aesthetics with the concept of somaesthetics that focuses on the aesthetics of bodily existence: 'Somaesthetics can be provisionally defined as the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aisthesis) and creative self-fashioning' (1999, 302). Somaesthetics combines the analysis of bodily consciousness with practical somaesthetic exercises that provide tools for exploring one's own connection with the world (Shusterman 2008). When viewed through somaesthetics, physical activity can be seen as ameliorative and creative self-expression. Shusterman does not discuss the field of sport-related physical activities, but his philosophy of the living body and the way it conveys information about itself and the bodily connection with the outside physical world provides foundations for the analysis of the aesthetics of contemporary physical activities.

Kupfer (1983) says that physical activity creates time and space which everyday duties do not reach. The importance of aesthetics in physical activity is linked to the nature of our everyday lives. It is a place where we are free 'to act for the sake of enjoyment of the activity' (114). According to Kupfer, there is an implicit aesthetic deprivation in our everyday life, causing a feeling of dissatisfaction. Openness to the aesthetic and concentration on felt experiences brings us into better contact with our bodies and expels the 'disembodiment of modern life' (118). Engaging in a physical activity with an aesthetic approach can relieve the tensions of modern life by providing new bodily perspectives for confronting reality. Competitive sport can generate similar results: the intensity of effort in a contest may bring out the best in the participants – creating new and unforeseen aesthetic experiences.

Anderson (2001) regards participation in physical activity as humanizing, since it creates a margin where one can take risks and act spontaneously and connect with ourselves in a self-defining manner that is not possible elsewhere. Being active creates room for physical creativity and, furthermore, allows us to express ‘controlled wildness’ (144). However, these aspects are more likely to emerge if the participants are open to the aesthetic potential of the activity. Any activity can be dull and mechanical if the external goals, the utility of it, become more important than being receptive to the experiences it offers. Moving an activity away from the mechanical and quantitative model requires adopting habits that connect the activity back to our ordinary experiences.

According to Kreft (2012), at the centre of the aesthetics of being physically active is the participants’ aesthetic experience – ‘the sensitive openness and receptiveness’ – where they can feel the fullness of life (223). The appeal of the activity is important for its aesthetics values: the participation is voluntary, because the activity is ‘existentially challenging and aesthetically attractive’ (232). The key to the unique aesthetic experiences in physical activity is the variation between playfulness and seriousness. Being active and trying one’s best is serious activity, but at the same time the participants are aware that serious activity exists within play.

Instead of associating physical activity firstly with health or achievement, the views just discussed connect it with corporeal openness, enjoyment and creativity. Moreover, they see participating in an activity as a source of aesthetic experiences that produce positive effects on the quality of everyday life. Emphasizing the aesthetic aspects does not eliminate the health effects or the idea of achievement in physical activity. Health effects exist, even though the objectives of physical activity changes, however they cease to be the central reason for being active. Also, achievement, the key concept of modern sport, is implicitly present in all the texts referred to above, but not as the intrinsic objective of the activity, but as a means for aesthetic experiences: trying one’s best can bring one to an area where new experiences become possible.

### ***Reconstruction of the substance of physical activities***

The experiences pursued in physical activity do not need to be extreme. Rynnänen (2015) makes a theoretical exploration of a similar phenomenon in contemporary art, where the extreme uses of body are emphasized and moderate bodily acts disregarded. According to his critical analysis of various works of art, concentration on extremes causes a bias in the use of the body. In order to adjust and balance the situation, Rynnänen points out how ordinary acts are employed in an artistic setting and how they can be more valuable than breaking boundaries by extreme actions. Instead of shocking the audience, an artist can show examples and use their body in a way achievable for everyone and contribute to positive changes in society.

In a similar manner, the extreme physical acts in sport that stretch our conception of human capability have very little to do with mundane physical activity. The concept of achievement calls for a new mode of operation that values moderate acts instead of extremes. Building a connection between achievement and experiences is the key element in shifting physical activity in this direction, and therefore the concept of achievement requires reorientation: it should be seen as a wider evaluation of the quality of physical experiences, thus emphasizing the experiences of the masses rather than the talented.

The quality of experience should be the main objective for recreational activity, but in an expanded view. Increasing the magnitude of experience is not the only way to enhance the quality of experiences. The same goal can be reached by the expansion of one's skills and abilities, for instance exploring new running routes and enjoying the new views, or trying out orienteering instead of a regular run. For an older athlete, whose performance is declining, it can be a change of perspective, learning to appreciate more subtle experiences and the finesses of the ordinary instead of the extreme. No measurable results are needed, but a shift in the viewpoint that revitalizes the activity and gives it new kind of substance.

The concept of achievement has already changed within recreational sports and exercise: the results are still quantified, but the position in a competition is less important. Most recreational athletes compete against themselves and their previous results instead of the other participants in the race. In team sports, the nature of activity is different, but especially in recreational contests, a good game can be more meaningful than the result (Naukkarinen 2011). A dramatic and even struggle has a greater aesthetic density and it produces more varied experiences than an overwhelming victory. Moreover, here the aesthetic experience has an obvious social dimension, where the purpose emerges from meeting other enthusiasts and struggling together with them (Kupfer 1983).

Post-sport practices have developed their own standards concerning performance and achievement even further. These activities emphasize skill, but with creative input. Skateboarders' achievements will not reach perfection if they are not showing signs of creativity. People can enjoy their practice without creative input, but the standard that requires originality creates pressure to try new approaches and explore the limits of the practice. This kind of achievement cannot be measured: it is recognized by comparing one's creativity with known tricks, locations and styles, and finally it is proved through the respect of others involved in the activity. (Beal 1995; Rannikko and Liikanen 2015)

Besides achievement, the substance of physical activity requires a wider perspective. In the first place, contemporary physical activity should be understood as being in connection with practices that reside outside the traditional frame of sport and exercise. Acknowledging these connections will add diversity to the meanings physical activity carries. Some activities are already connected to various dissonant practices and can exemplify the transformation that results from a wider perspective. For instance, walking is a sport, but much more often something else. The meanings walking carries, vary when it is connected to pilgrimages, wars and expeditions, city-life or demonstrations. Furthermore, a walk can be a social stroll in the city or a pilgrimage of hundreds of kilometres, which again carry different connotations. As a result, walking has served as inspiration for philosophy, poems, essays, travelogues and manifestos (Solnit 2001). All these aspects formulate the conceptual content of walking and subsequently affect the practice itself.

When the impact of the remodelled concept of achievement and the wider perception of the meaning of physical activity is used to place physical activities in a relation with contemporary culture, a variety of new perspectives on physical activity will be opened up. The new concept of achievement is already visible in various activities and the innovative uses of physical activity outside the concept of sport are emerging both autonomously and through active development. For instance, today's running practice has inspired various innovative applications: participants in the *GoodGym* organization (GoodGym: <https://www.goodgym.org/>) combine their running exercises with doing errands for older people and people with disabilities, while barefoot running forms counter-movement to today's

high-tech filled running culture (Bajič 2014). Changes of this kind in the concept of physical activity broaden its field and create original meanings for it.

### **Creative acts in physical activity**

Creativity in physical activity involves exploring the possibilities of physical activity determined by the limits of personal potentials and inclinations. Playful and creative experimentation can bring new ingredients into an established practice. This involves looking for new perspectives on the practice, perspectives that abandon the paradigmatic idea of the activity and still retain the essence of it. Stretching the limits of a practice change it, but still keep it recognizable. It is also possible to use creativity in ways that are not predefined or in conflict with the established idea of the practice. This kind of stretching the limits of the practice can lead to the development of a new practice. Some contemporary art projects have employed and emphasized the possibilities of creative acts in physical activity. However, the objective of these intentionally artistic endeavours (for instance *Great North Run Culture*: [www.greatnorthrunculture.org](http://www.greatnorthrunculture.org) and *Run! Run! Run! Biennale*: <http://kaisyngtan.com/r3fest/>) reaches further into the field of the art proper than the creative experimentation in ordinary physical activity (Tainio 2017).

In some physical activities, creativity exists as an inherent part of the practice, but there is no reason to refrain from creative actions within the traditional activities. Actually, their seeds are present even in the traditional sports that are practised outside official sport organizations. Eichberg has identified several variants of football that somehow, often in creative ways, differ from the official version of the sport (association football), but are still recognizable as football (Eichberg 2010). In a similar manner, many recreational physical activities have departed from the official sport and developed parallel practices that resemble the sport, but do not conform with the official version. The boundaries between the official activities and their variants are fluctuating; an individual engaged in an activity can participate in competitions that follow the official rules of the practice, but in her exercises adapt the practice according to personal liking. Even though individual athletes can play in both fields, institutions have difficulty in dealing with the new situation (Kreft 2008; Atkinson 2010a).

I started running in my early thirties, because I wanted to keep fit. Today, about fifteen years later, I keep running, because I want my running to guide me to new experiences. My goals have never been precise. However, after a few years of running I aimed at a marathon and today I am thinking about trail running events and plan even longer distances. Nowadays, time has less importance than the overall experience or surviving the route. At the outset I carefully chose the right type of footwear for my feet and gait, but during the past five years I have been adopting a minimalist style, using shoes without suspension and I am planning to give up shoes completely. I have even used my running practice as a tool for making art (Tainio 2015, 220–227, 245–246). All the choices I have made are guided by curiosity and personal inclination, not any rules and regulations. According to traditional thinking, my running is declining, but adapting the practice uncovers new possibilities.

## The consequences of the aesthetic attitude toward physical activity

There is a value laden understanding of the meaning of physical activity where the excessive concentration on the utilitarian aspects and emphasis on the external ends of being active produces a narrow concept of physical activity. The narrow concept is visible in the common justifications of physical activity that originate from the nineteenth century and are still used frequently. They affect the perception of the contemporary physical practices by focusing on the benefits external to the activity: health, character building, preparation for the demands of working life and means of personal transformation. This dated understanding hides the wider cultural connections, which participating in physical activity has today and it disconnects human movement from those aesthetic aspects that make being physically active interesting and worthwhile.

Elaborating the potential of aesthetics and emphasizing the possibilities of creativity in physical activities widens the understanding about the field of physical activity in contemporary society and deepens its meanings. Paying attention to the aesthetic qualities present in current physical activities gives people more understanding about the reasons why they are engaged in some practice as well as encouraging them to try activities in order to gain new aesthetic experiences. Sometimes this quest can be seen as an artistic approach.

Including aesthetic aspects as a significant part of physical activity emphasizes experiences different in kind from the current conception of sport and exercise. The result would be a more inclusive physical culture that encompasses a wider range of activities and a wider range of possible experiences. There are serious reasons to connect aesthetics and physical activity – especially in contemporary culture where various forms of human movement are an immovable part of it.

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