



Affect and public health – Choreographing atmospheres of movement and participation



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ABSTRACT

Attempts at improving physical activity rates among the population are central to many government, public health, and third sector approaches to encouraging health behaviours. However, to date there has been little attempt by public health to embrace different theoretical-methodological approaches, relying instead upon largely quantitative techniques. This paper argues that through a development of a framework of affect amplification, public health approaches to physical activity should incorporate the choreographing of spaces of movement. Drawing on two case studies, both incorporating ethnographic methodologies, this paper complicates the idea that public health can rely on individual or population level approaches that overlook affective and spatial entanglements. This paper concludes by outlining offer a series of ideas to encourage physical activity participation.

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1. Introduction: affect and public health

Physical activity is central to public health approaches and interventions in combatting non-communicable disease (obesity, cardio-vascular disease, cancer). Despite the omnipotence of message little change has been made. Public health is reliant on rational cognitive and behavioural theories of action. In foregrounding the rational human, these approaches leave no room for the role of affect in shaping practices. There is an opportunity for geographies of affect to cleave a space within public health theory and research that could develop thinking and establish more ethically sensitive approaches to pressing health issues.

For public health this means experimenting with creating and choreographing atmospheres to aid careful thinking about the drivers and constraints of physical activity. The intention of this paper is to outline how choreographing affect can be utilised for improving public health methodologies towards physical activity. There are three aims; (1) provide a theoretical orientation for thinking with affect for public health engagements with physical activity, (2) examine the techniques, technologies, and material arrangements of creating an affective space to think through methods of practical engagement with affect, and (3) by way of a

conclusion, offer a series of ideas of how choreographing affect could help to improve physical activity participation. The orientation developed throughout the paper draws on the choreography of affect (Manning, 2013), the cartography of affective intensity (Guattari, 1995; Spinoza, 1996), and the atmospherics of experience (McCormack, 2013).

The world is full of affects, working on registers of awareness that often escape the grasp of conscious reasoning. Thrift (2008, p 175) writes that affects are “a different kind of intelligence about the world, but it is intelligence nonetheless”. While Conradson and Latham (2007, 236) position affect as “not thought in the sense of a conscious working through a series of logical steps or evaluation, but rather a whole-body cognition of the world. Rooted in a particular set of physiological and neurological responses, affect is an embodied appraisal of external stimuli”. The power of affect has been deployed in different fields. For example, in politics by the use of sensations of fear (Connolly, 2005), as the potential of making ‘new worlds’ that would open political agency to new modes of consideration (Amin and Thrift, 2013), and how the development of sensations has the potential to dislocate subjectivity, which in turn has political potential for new styles of living communally (Panagia, 2009). The idea that spaces, objects, and other elements have the power to move people in certain ways is certainly not new (Whitehead, 1938).

The potential of thinking with affect matters because of the

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concerted effort by governments and public health bodies to increase levels of physical activity (Breckenkamp et al., 2004; Faramawi and Caffrey, 2010). However, despite the cautions, participation rates in physical exercise are decreasing across Europe (Hallal et al., 2012). The decline of physical activity across the continent has sparked appeals for an improved understanding of how, why, and in what ways people engage in physical activity to help inform ideas and policy (Hagströmer et al., 2006).¹ Despite the suggested urgency, research and policy recommendations draw on a relatively small field of knowledge. Therefore, the promise of working with theories of affect amplification is an important opportunity for public health and social science to work more closely together. The adoption of thinking with affect in public health circles also presents an opportunity to challenge ingrained ideas about how to encourage new modes of participation and embedden a rethinking of the reliance on quantitative studies (Hitchings, 2013). This would open the discipline to wider theoretical-methodological perspectives (Barnfield, 2016).

The paper is structured as follows; the next section will outline the two research projects that the empirical material of this paper is drawn, this is followed by the development of the theoretical orientation of choreographing affect that is drawn from the work, principally of, Spinoza, Guattari, Manning, and McCormack. The second half of the paper is devoted to the empirical material that is presented in two case study vignettes and a discussion that explores the ways affect is drawn out in the development of a football pitch and a ParkRun. The paper ends with a conclusion that points to ways that affect amplification could be incorporated into public health approaches.

2. A note on method

This paper is based upon on two case studies from separate research projects. The first is from a PhD research project that explored the spatialities of football as an expressive event. It examined the tools and processes used in creating and maintaining an elite level football pitch. The fieldwork involved spending several weeks with the pitch staff at Everton, an elite professional football team in the English Premier League. The second is from a post-PhD research project that examined the techniques and technologies of participating in physical exercise in Sofia, Bulgaria.² It explores a weekly ParkRun in a European city. A ParkRun is a free to enter running event. The route is five kilometres and there are no restrictions on age, numbers, or ability. The ParkRun has been very successful, attracting nearly two hundred regular runners in a city with declining participation rates in physical exercise (Eurostat, 2012). The organisers have also started ParkRuns and running weekends in three more cities in Bulgaria. I kept a multimedia field diary that recorded my own and others' experiences of establishing and maintaining running routines in the city of Sofia.

The two research projects used mixed methods, prioritising qualitative approaches. In particular participant observation was used to gain a deep insight into how these two different affective events are produced (Burawoy, 1998). I participated in the daily actions of the pitch staff to prepare the pitch for matches, keeping a field diary, photographs, and interviews with the pitch staff and their practices (Vannini, 2015). In the running project I participated in recreational running events, running club activities, and

explored practices of daily exercise routines. The runners, drawn from two recreational clubs, were surveyed and then a group of sixteen (10 male and 6 female) participated in follow up qualitative interviews to discuss their practices (Hitchings, 2012).

3. Developing public health

This paper is interested in thinking with affect and how this can be best used within public health approaches to physical activity. This involves thinking about how space and affective intensities can be choreographed or 'engineered' (Lin, 2015). The potential of material arrangement, the staging of atmospheres, and moving bodies in affect amplification hold promise for public health approaches to cities. Public health research and guidance has tended to place a great amount of importance on the rational human who either chooses to exercise, or needs 'nudging' into good health behaviours. However, both of these approaches discount the influences of more-than-human elements in the world. To help improve both public health approaches and rates of physical activity requires thinking about the spaces, techniques, and technologies of engagement in exercise practices. Starting and staying physically active encompasses more than mindful and rational decision-making (McCormack and Schwanen, 2011). Therefore, public health research needs to adopt delicate techniques for the range of contextual factors (Barnfield, 2015).

There are three reasons why the methods used for research require modification. First, a statistics-based approach continues to lead in physical activity research (Hitchings, 2013). This is a reasonable state of affairs given the methodological background of much of public health. That being said, statistical analysis will only ever be able to deliver a colourless version of the everyday and what this means for physical activity (Heath et al., 2012). Further, the desire for ever larger sample sizes, only reduces the connection between researcher and participant. The danger is of missing out on the subtle and not so subtle pressures, concerns, and fixations that help to explain participation. Second, as a result, much less is known about how the subtleties of engagement influence participation in physical activity (Cummins et al., 2007). This is due to much of the focus being primarily on land use design and planning (Frank et al., 2010). This serves to limit the range of research by understanding space as a passive backdrop that is solely animated by human endeavour (Massey, 2005). This elides the complex assemblages of different materials, practices of engagement, and cultures of movement that need to be considered as fundamental to any form of participation. Therefore, the choreographing of affect and space opens up the possibilities for engendering an active disposition of movement. A disposition that would foreground a daily ethics of moving bodies and physical activity.

Finally, is the reliance of public health approaches on behavioural models such as the theory of planned behaviour (PBT) (Ajzen, 1985). This has been the leading theoretical approach guiding research on health-related behaviour over the last thirty years (Sniehotta et al., 2014). Briefly PBT advances the notion that volitional human behaviour is implemented within the intention to execute the behaviour and perceived behavioural maintenance. Here, intention is theorised to be an outcome of attitudes towards the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural mechanisms (Sniehotta et al., 2014). PBT has weaknesses due to its emphasis on rational reasoning, rejecting unconscious influences on behaviour and the function of emotions beyond projected affective results (Conner et al., 2013). The inert illustrative nature offers little insight into the effects on cognitions and future behaviour (Sutton, 2002). Further, there is a distinct lack of accountability for variability in observed behaviour and of individuals who form an intention and subsequently fail to act.

¹ However, a note of caution should be sounded when suggesting certain body types, practices, or spaces are unhealthy, see Colls and Evans for an excellent critique of the obesogenic literature and attitudes towards bodies seen as physically unfit or diseased (Colls and Evans, 2009, 2014).

² See Barnfield and Plyusheva (2015) for a study of cycling practices in Sofia.

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