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Bodily crises in skilled performance: Considering the need for artistic habits

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ABSTRACT

Empirical evidence demonstrates that performing artists are confronted by a variety of 'bodily crises' (e.g., injury, attrition of habits induced by ageing) over the course of their careers (Wainwright, Williams, & Turner, 2005). Such crises may present a serious threat to the embodied subject. Unfortunately, many prominent theories of skill acquisition (e.g., Fitts & Posner, 1967) appear to evacuate the body from performance by suggesting that any form of conscious processing (i.e., paying conscious attention to one's action during motor skill execution) will disrupt habitual behaviour. As a result, few researchers have considered how performers might tackle bodily anomalies. In the current paper, we seek to address this issue by discussing a variety of the '*crises*' that confront the performing body. We start by discussing a number of disciplinary practices that may contribute to these crises. Next, we argue that habitual movements must be open to 'acts of creativity' in order to maintain a productive relationship between the performing body and the environment. Then we consider what this 'creative action' might involve and discuss a number of approaches (e.g., mindfulness, somaesthetic awareness) that could maintain and improve one's movement proficiency. Here, our argument draws on Dewey's (1922) pragmatist philosophy and his belief that 'intelligent habit' was required to help people to improve their movement functioning. Finally, we consider the implications of our argument for current conceptualisations of 'habitual' movement and recommend that researchers explore the adaptive and flexible capacity of the performing body.

In seeking to explain the effortlessness that appears to accompany the execution of well-learned movement, James (1950) argued that "habit diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed" (p. 114). James (1911) believed that such smooth, fluent and efficient movements can only occur when we "trust spontaneity and fling away all further care" (p. 72). Many researchers in the fields of cognitive neuroscience, sport psychology and motor skill acquisition seem to support James' aphorism by proclaiming that skilled movement in a variety of motor skill domains is 'non-mindful' or 'intuitive' in nature. These words are generally used to capture the automaticity (i.e., performance requires progressively fewer attentional resources as one acquires greater skill) that is believed to accompany the effortless and fluent execution of *habitual* movement. Indeed, James (1890) believed that habit involves "sequences of behaviours, usually simple. . .that have become virtually automatic" (p. 107). We are told that skilled performers do not need to think about their actions; instead, 'what must be done, simply is done' (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2004, p. 253). Such accounts assume that the repetitive practice of experts results in the formation of habitual routines which are run by unthinking automaticity (Bailey & Pickard, 2010; Bargh & Chartrand, 1999).

Common to many of the preceding theoretical perspectives is the notion that the body recedes from direct experience when we perform habitual movements. For example, Leder (1990) argues that the body is an 'absent presence' during the performance of everyday routines and that it is not until one is injured or ill that one becomes aware of the mechanical details governing the execution of these actions. Similarly, in sport we are told that problems are likely to arise 'when an athlete stops using the smooth and practiced techniques and begins to use excessive thinking and "reinvests" effort back to motor functions and one's physical problems' (Weiss & Reber, 2012, p. 176). We agree that 'phenomenological effacement' (Leder, 1990, p. 26) is likely to accompany the performance of simple tasks (for example, I buttered a piece of toast this morning and have little recollection of the process) but argue that skilled performers (in sport, dance and music) are perfectly used to attending to the body and are required to do so owing to the myriad challenges

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that confront them. For example, an extensive volume of evidence (e.g., Bissell, 2013; Collins, Morriss, & Trower, 1999; Sparkes & Smith, 1999; Wainwright, Williams, & Turner, 2005) points to the 'sudden volatile transformations' (Bissell, 2013, p. 122) that occur to the performing body (e.g., injury, accidents, fatigue, loss of form, attrition of habits induced by ageing, movement disorders and so on) and render it vulnerable to habitual disruptions or crises. As a consequence, elite performers in all motor skill domains have little choice but to learn 'new and better techniques' (Breivik, 2007, p. 127) which will require them to consciously refine habitual movement patterns. Unfortunately, little research has been conducted to date on how performing artists respond to 'bodily crises'.

Therefore, in the current paper, we draw on empirical evidence and phenomenological description from skilled athletes, musicians and dancers to consider some of the strategies that could help performing artists to address their 'bodily crises' (e.g., injury). According to Shilling (2008) crisis occurs when 'there develops a significant mismatch or conflict between the social and physical surroundings in which individuals live and their biological and bodily potentialities' (p. 16). Although we focus on bodily crises we acknowledge the existence of other types of crises (e.g., loss of confidence) that may influence one's movement and performance proficiency. *First*, we consider how various disciplinary practices that are a common feature of performance environments may contribute to the emergence of these crises. *Second*, we discuss a variety of the '*crises*' that confront the performing body (paying particular attention to the crises that threaten to disrupt one's habitual or routinised movement patterns). Importantly, although we argue that these crises may present a formidable challenge to the performer, we recognise that they might also represent opportunities for development, that is, the possibility to explore and extend one's capabilities. *Third*, we argue that habitual movements must be open to 'acts of creativity' in order to maintain a productive relationship between the embodied subject and the environment (Joas, 1996). We consider what this 'creative action' might involve and discuss a number of approaches (e.g., mindfulness, somaesthetic awareness) one may adopt in seeking to care for the body. In doing so, we draw on Dewey's (1922) pragmatist philosophy and, in particular, his belief that 'intelligent habit' was required to help people improve their movement proficiency. We conclude by considering what this perspective might mean for current conceptualisations of 'habitual' movement and suggest that researchers should continue to explore the adaptive and flexible capacity of the performing body.

Although the preceding section contains a number of specific aims, the present paper has one major overriding goal. Specifically, we wish to acknowledge the extraordinary demands placed on the body by elite training regimes (in a variety of skill domains) and explain how traditional conceptualisations of skilled performance (which largely evacuate the body from performance) have neglected to consider how the performer might deal with bodily crises. Although we acknowledge the value of recent research which has put forward models that offer a prescriptive account of how 'attenuated' technique might be altered (see Carson & Collins, 2011), we call for a complementary line of enquiry that recognises and discusses the complexities that face performers who are expected to maintain high levels of technical proficiency. As several scholars have identified, this disciplinary expectation is a common cause of many disruptions to the athletic competing body (Johns & Johns, 2000; Jones, Glintmeyer, & McKenzie, 2005; Sparkes, 1998). We hope that such a line of research will encourage these performers to develop a 'practical reflexive monitoring of their habitual embodied "going"' (corporeal sensations and linked emotions; Hockey, 2013, p. 140). In doing so, performers may learn to embrace the adaptive capacity of the body (i.e., its artistic skill which is inherently flexible and open to change) – and consider various means of increasing the body's resilience and potential. Crucially, this process requires performers to listen to their body instead of allowing it to recede into background awareness.

1. Disciplinary constraints upon the performing body

One area where the performing body plays a central role is that of elite-level sport. Performance environments can be characterised as a social arrangement that disciplines individual and collective bodies into 'docility' (Markula & Pringle, 2006). In sport, athletic bodies are, through various techniques of discipline, fabricated into productive and efficient machines, capable of the 'function' of automated expert performance (Heikkala, 1993). The arrangement of the 'modern discipline' (Shogan, 1999) of elite sport dictates that through the precise control, timetabling, measurement and surveillance of bodies, deviation from an activity's historically celebrated bodily movements is disallowed (Denison, Mills, & Jones, 2013). In short, elite sport's disciplinary arrangement is set-up to produce reliable bodies capable of consistent, mechanistic performance outcomes (Mills & Denison, 2013). However, it is important to acknowledge that a strict observance of these latter outcomes may aid optimal performance in certain activities (e.g., the pole-vault where consistent and mechanistic movement patterns may be required) but hinder performance in others (e.g., figure skating where performance is judged partly on aesthetic or expressive criteria).

Nevertheless, individual athletes who become subjects of the disciplinary arrangement of their performance environment may find the precise movements of their bodies heavily monitored. Elite sport sustains a 'correct means of training' (Foucault, 1991) through hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and repeated examination. This training of the body is ensured through the adoption of various disciplinary practices including training logs and fitness testing (Denison et al., 2013), video based performance analysis (Taylor, Potrac, Nelson, Groom, & Jones, in press), GPS data (Williams & Manley, 2014), and consistent observation by an expert (Johns & Johns, 2000; Lang, 2010). These constant techniques utilise "surveillance" (i.e., indirect or direct observation of individuals) to ensure that the bodily movements of performers are observed, controlled and regulated efficiently (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010). For example, in their analysis of elite swimming environments, McMahon, Penney, and Dinan-Thompson (2012) and Lang (2010), identified that the pressure of being under constant surveillance leads athletic bodies to submit to intensive training protocols, and to self-regulate their own bodily movements and behaviours both during and after their careers. This level of surveillance is also true in other performance arts, including ballet (Green, 1999), where a strong sense of surveillance is regarded as natural to the culture (Benn & Walters, 2001). To illustrate, a ballet dancer in Wainwright et al.'s study (2005) revealed that 'Every single day that you come to work, people are watching you. You're looking at yourself; your colleagues are looking at you, you're looking at colleagues. You're always being watched by somebody'. A dancer in Dryburgh and Fortin's (2010) study also admitted that 'I was told I had to lose weight all the time, so I felt as though I was under surveillance, that's for sure' (p. 98). Interestingly, in these environments "positive surveillance" (e.g., motivation) might be beneficial for the dancer's psychological health while "negative surveillance" (e.g., impossible attainment of an ideal body) has a negative impact on their health.

The demands and expectations of professional performance environments (for example a ballet company or elite sport programme) may place coaches/directors under significant pressure to produce capable and reliable performers with mandated bodily appearances and movements (Oliver, 2005). The accepted default process to ensure this occurs is to continue applying training programmes that are designed in accordance with a dominant