



## Moved to messiness: Physical activity, feelings, and transdisciplinarity



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### ABSTRACT

This paper is based on conversations that took place during a scholarly reading group on the sociology of emotions. The members of the group shared an interest in the body, movement, and culture, but our academic and 'athletic' backgrounds were quite varied. Our diverse socio-cultural understandings of emotions were complicated by our own (emotional) experiences of physical (in)activity, thus conversations cut a wide and varied path. One idea, however, continued to resonate throughout our discussions; we found the experiential, theoretical, and methodological notion of *messiness* to hold great possibility as it allowed us to avoid the urge to reduce diverse experiences to a singular voice (Christians, 2011; Cornforth et al., 2012; Ellingson, 2009; Noble, 2009). Consequently, our project here is twofold. First, we experiment with communal writing as a method for undertaking a study of physical activity. Second, rather than any one perspective taking precedence we use this practice as a way to demonstrate the potential of embracing messiness as a collaborative ethical and theoretical method for understanding the complexities of emotions in relation to (in)active bodies. Specifically, using a variety of disciplinary and theoretical lenses we explore physical (in)activity in relation to pain/pleasure, and the gaze and performance. The result is a conversation made up of traditional and non-traditional approaches to academic writing that work to reconfigure and to challenge traditional dichotomies and hierarchical understandings of the active body, understandings that potentially over-simplify and close-down our emotional experiences of physical (in)activity.

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"Cultural interpretation is an ongoing, always incomplete process, and no one gets the final word" (Bordo, 1999: 29).

In 2011, the authors of this paper—colleagues at the University of Alberta with a shared interest in the body, movement, and culture—took part in a scholarly reading group on the sociology of emotion. Over the course of 8 weeks we read and discussed 14 articles spanning disciplinary boundaries and taking up historical, theoretical, ethical, and philosophical components of affect and emotion, with conversations paying particular attention to the ways different socio-cultural perspectives on emotions might help inform theorizations of the moving body.<sup>1</sup> Our academic

backgrounds were varied: we were philosophers, critical disability theorists, phenomenologists, poststructuralists, and theoretical-fence sitters (inasmuch as these are distinguishable from each other). We also brought differing experiences of physical activity to the fore: we were high performance athletes, recreational movers, dancers, exercisers, and the sport-averse.

The range of experiences and knowledges resulted in conversations that cut a wide and varied path. But as we spent hours exploring emotions, the body, movement, and culture from often quite different theoretical and experiential places one word continued to resonate with all of us, as a descriptor of our own experiences of physical activity, but also as the flavor of our shared conversations. That word was *messy*.

Messy (adj.): untidy or dirty; confused, disordered, careless and slovenly; cannot eliminate attitudes, emotions, values, and desires; multiple; difficult to deal with, full of awkward complications (Barber, 2004a,b; Gove, 1993b, 1418). The etymology of messy, from mess (n.)—meaning a communal meal (Gove, 1993a, 1993b; Barnhard 1988)—reveals a connection with the communal work we have undertaken here. It was messiness that allowed us to

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<sup>1</sup> The original reading list is available at [www.movedtomessiness.wordpress.com](http://www.movedtomessiness.wordpress.com). The reference list at the end of this paper includes additional readings drawn on to inform our work here.

consider emotions beyond traditional theoretical boundaries and which moved us to be continuously engaged with new experiences of emotions and physical activity. Furthermore, our emotional experiences in different facets of physical activity past and present, our creation of the experiential writings that comprise the 'data' for this paper, our analysis, and the activity of writing this paper were all messy processes—complicated, emotional, and communal (Barber, 2004a; Gove, 1993b). Upon reflection, we agreed that it is, in fact, the messiness that brings the entire process together. Put another way, the idea of messiness enabled us to imagine together the ethical, the theoretical, the methodological, the experiential, and the emotional. We were, so to speak, *moved to messiness*. Consequently, our project here is twofold: first, we experiment with communal writing as a method for undertaking a study of physical activity; second, rather than any one perspective taking precedence—or, borrowing from Bordo, getting the final word—we use this practice as a way to demonstrate the potential of embracing messiness as a collaborative ethical and theoretical method for understanding the complexities of emotions in relation to (in)active bodies.

## 1. Messy ethics

In this paper we argue that messiness can be understood as an ethical engagement with varied experiences and knowledges. Following Christians (2011), Ellingson (2009), and Noble (2009) we argue that adequately reflecting diverse and potentially contradictory experiences—rather than reducing them to a singular Truth or voice—can be understood as an overtly political and ethical project. That is, “through dialogic encounter, subjects create life together and nurture one another’s moral obligation to it” (Christians, 2011: 150). Denzin (1995, 1997) furthermore, advocates for the ethical and methodological potential of “messy texts,” which Inckle (2005) describes as ones “where the borders of truth and knowledge, fact and fiction, self and other are blurred” (228). In disability studies, messiness has been articulated as a crucial aesthetic, activist, and methodological movement (Kuppers, 2004, 2010; McRuer, 2006; Peers et al., 2012), while feminist and queer theorists (e.g., Davis, 2007; Halberstam, 2012; Kuriloff et al., 2011) have also drawn on ‘messy texts’ in representing their research and promoting diverse social justice practices.

Within sport studies, the use of messy texts has been far less common. Denison (2010), for example, provides one of only a few examples within the field of sport coaching. According to Denison, “messy texts” are important critical tools for qualitative sport and coaching researchers especially in a context where “the push from governments and universities has been for qualitative research to erase the messiness from their results in devising more evidence-based practices” (157). Messy texts are thus particularly important within fields of sport research that largely privilege “hard evidence” and knowledge informed by the sport sciences. In these fields, they hold potential as tools to resist the way “the politics of evidence operate within sport” (157), as well as the way that dominant sporting discourses work to depoliticize the production of evidence, coaching, and sporting ‘truths.’ That is, embracing messiness may move individual coaches and coach educators to question their own relationship to “evidence,” ensuring that it “doesn’t just serve as an uncritical problem solving technology” (157), and that they comprehend the potential problems associated with applying evidence-based research without taking account of contextual factors.

We argue, along with Denison (2010), that messy texts act as resistance to an unproblematized evidence-based model for studies of sport. Further, sport, exercise, and dance provide strong examples of the ethical potential of messy representations; experiences

in physical activity, regardless of type or level, are messy things, despite efforts in dominant discourses of sport, exercise, and physical activity to promote them as simply ‘healthy’, ‘fun’ and available/accessible for all (Bigelow et al., 2001; Canadian Sport for Life, 2012; Hawkins, 2008; Rintala, 2009). Moreover, there has been a significant growth of research into emotion in sport and exercise psychology in the past decade, with a particular interest in the connection between emotion and sport performance (Friesen et al., 2013). We share the concerns of critical and poststructuralist sport researchers who articulate the need to move beyond positivist and humanistic theoretical frameworks to theorize sport, exercise, and physical education (Gard and Meyenn, 2000; Gard and Wright, 2001; Tinning, 2002; Lauss, 2010; Pringle, 2010). Reliance on these frameworks may function to mechanize and depoliticize coaching and sporting practices while individualizing the various effects of these practices and experiences.

Messiness also enabled us to explore the transdisciplinary nature of this collective project. It is inherently messy to bring the disparate together and in doing so create something new (Leavy, 2011). What we attempt to illustrate through our work here is that embracing messiness allowed us to remain collaborative through all aspects of the project; the idea of messiness provided a starting point to work from (and to return to) ensuring each of our voices could be present and represented. Put another way, embracing the idea of messiness allowed us to move forward collaboratively, knowing that each of our ideas would be valued and would contribute to the overall project in equitable ways. In this place of messiness we were able to re/imagine, communicate and creatively, ethically, and thoughtfully cross/blur disciplinary (and theoretical) boundaries. As a group, we negotiated a process—within the comfortable discomfort of messiness—where we did not seek out consensus or shared resolution to our questions and ponderings around physical activity and emotions but rather considered the multiple ways that we might think about these two things and their potential relationships to one another. Like Ahmed, we began and stayed immersed in “the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into the world” (Ahmed, 2008: 10). We invite you to get (un)comfortable in the messiness with us as we make our way through the quagmire of physical activity and emotion.

## 2. Theoretically messy

How do six diverse people<sup>2</sup> theorize movement and emotion? How does messiness translate to the ways that we understand and frame our experiences? How can we challenge and transform ourselves by way of a shared conversation? These questions were perhaps further complicated by the short duration of the reading group (i.e., 8-weeks) and limited readings covered on each topic (i.e., 2–3 texts per topic). This short reading list provided our common starting point for discussion although each member brought his or her varied knowledges, perspectives and experiences to the conversations that ensued—adding yet another layer of ‘messiness’ to the project. Our discussions spanned neuro-sociology, Foucauldian-influenced studies of emotion, phenomenology, Deleuzian theory, and queer and feminist theories of affect. A frightening menagerie to say the least, but it was, in fact, the intersections of such diverse fields, a transdisciplinarity, that brought the richness and messiness of emotion and movement to light. Nevertheless, there were a few theoretical perspectives,

<sup>2</sup> For more information about the six collaborators please see our biographies, particularly as they relate to our academic-active selves, available at: [www.movedtomessiness.wordpress.com](http://www.movedtomessiness.wordpress.com).

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