Kinesiology’s Inconvenient Truth and the Physical Cultural Studies Imperative

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This article explicates the inconvenient truth that is at the core of the crisis currently facing the field of kinesiology. Namely, the instantiation of an epistemological hierarchy that privileges positivist over postpositivist, quantitative over qualitative, and predictive over interpretive ways of knowing. The discussion outlines the political, economic, and cultural forces responsible for kinesiology’s putative scientific hegemony and speaks to its corollary: the very demise of the field caused by intensified subdisciplinary specialization and fragmentation and fundamental lack of comprehensiveness. The article outlines a potential corrective to kinesiology’s blinkered epistemological and empirical vision, currently being developed at the University of Maryland. Physical Cultural Studies (PCS) is introduced as a synthesis of empirical, theoretical, and methodological influences (drawn from, among other sources, the sociology and history of sport and physical activity, the sociology of the body, and cultural studies) that are focused on the critical analysis of active bodies and specifically the manner in which they become organized, represented, and experienced in relation to the operations of social power. Thus, PCS is offered as an important contribution toward realizing the truly integrative and comprehensive kinesiology to which we as kinesiologists—and regardless of our empirical, theoretical, or epistemological proclivities—should aspire.

I would like to thank Jane Clark for the opportunity of speaking at the Academy meetings, something I consider to be both a significant honor and an equally weighty obligation. In terms of the latter—and in due deference to the Nobel laureate Al Gore (2006)—it would have been disingenuous of me to let this opportunity pass without focusing on the inconvenient truth that I believe presently debilitates the field of kinesiology and thereby compromises its very future. By this, I am referring to the scientific doxa apparent and embodied within the constitution of kinesiology departments, curricula, journals, and, indeed, the academy itself. Although doubtless comforting to many, the inconvenient truth of kinesiology’s epistemic inequities is troubling to a productive, if frequently overlooked, constituency of scholars. Thus, although my brief was to examine some of the challenges facing the sociology of sport subdiscipline of kinesiology in the first decade of the 21st century, as it happens, I see the fate of both the sociology of sport and kinesiology as being...
inextricably linked. Indeed, the recognition—by Maryland faculty and graduate students within the sociological and historical realms of inquiry—of kinesiology’s current crisis (and I do feel it is in no way an exaggeration to speak in such terms) and their position within it has led to ongoing programmatic innovation that we view as crucial to the future of our area of study and to that of kinesiology more generally.

My central thesis is that kinesiology is facing a crisis that is, at the very least, manifest in terms of epistemological hierarchy (the primary focus of this discussion), empirical ambiguity, and political impotency. While debilitating to the field in general, I would offer the observation that the thorns of the current predicament are particularly pernicious when it comes to those working within kinesiology’s social science and humanities realms. Having researched and written this article, it is evident that we, at Maryland, are by no means alone in either identifying the problematic nature of contemporary kinesiology formation or turning to the critical analysis of physical culture/the active body as a corrective. Clearly, Jennifer Hargreaves and Patricia Vertinsky (2007), Margaret Carlisle Duncan (2007), and the late Alan Ingham (1997), to name but four, need to be acknowledged in this regard. In introducing and developing the Physical Cultural Studies (PCS) project, however, we offer a therapeutic strategy that seeks to quell our not inconsiderable disquiet with, paraphrasing Foucault (1973), the kinesiological order of things.

Of course, much of that which I cover in this discussion has long entered popular kinesiological consciousness, but with little, if any, effect. Indeed, I was a PhD student at Illinois when we were introduced to the “Newell epic” (Spirduso, 1990), in which he cogently argued for the recentering of the field around the empirical focus of physical activity as a means of countering the threat of academic fragmentation and specialization (Newell’s “chaos”; Newell, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c; Newell & Slowikowski, 1990). I can vividly remember that the cohort of graduate students of which I was a part was entirely convinced, and indeed enthused, by Newell’s argument. Conversely, I did not feel that the faculty, or should I say some of the faculty, were in any way stirred by it; discussions of the future of kinesiology were apparently not worthy of drawing them away from what we perceived to be their self-aggrandizing research endeavors. Having scorned the faculty for their egomaniacal attitude, on graduation and matriculation into the tenure track regimen, and I suspect like the rest of my cohort, I soon lost my concern for the future of the field, and retreated to my own self-aggrandizing pursuits. The existential relief created by tenure, promotion, and doubtless membership of the Academy has encouraged me to reengage my collective conscience regarding the state and fate of kinesiology in general. Thus, I must confess, I awoke from 13 years of (self- and systemically induced) relative kinesiological slumber to find a field more-productive and prominent than it has ever been, yet one that continues to be fraught with internal strife. Today, we are arguably in a phase of hyperfragmentation and hyper specialization, neither of which bodes well for the long-term future of the field. This was clearly the message of Rikli’s (2006) recent discussion. I, however, do not want to offer you another call to kinesiological unity and common purpose; that is a given, or it should be. Rather, I would like to offer some insights into how we at Maryland are tackling issues of hyperfragmentation and hyperspecialization among those interested in the socio-historic analysis of physical activity (among which I would
include historians of sport and sociologists of sport). Pace Gill’s (2007) comment on the importance of intellectual integration cannot be overstated:

Kinesiology clearly is *multi*-disciplinary, drawing from many (multiple) disciplinary areas (e.g., biology, psychology, sociology), and including multiple subdisciplinary areas (e.g., biomechanics, sport history, exercise physiology). Isolated multiple subdisciplines do not make for an integrated academic area, and a collection of *cross*-disciplinary areas that simply live together does not constitute an integrated kinesiology discipline. *Inter*-disciplinary implies actual connections among subareas, and an interdisciplinary kinesiology that integrates subdisciplinary knowledge is essential. (p. 275)

Integration—around the central thematic of physical activity, of areas of study with common epistemological, ontological, and methodological bases—is, therefore, a necessary first step to creating a more-comprehensive and integrative kinesiology, one that does not hide behind the inadequacies and derelictions of its current iteration.

**I. The Epistemic Crisis of Kinesiology**

The origins of the epistemic hierarchy that presently defines the field can be traced to kinesiology’s formative steps in the early 1960s. This conjuncture was characterized by a post-Sputnik climate of increasing governmental oversight and accountability; the intent was to raise the scientific content and rigor of American education in general to counter the perceived Soviet threat (Oca, 2005). Clearly, the rationale and impetus for the emergence of kinesiology as an academic discipline originated in a time of Cold War–induced socio-political paranoia. It is my contention that the rush to *science* and *subdisciplinarity* that marked the development of the nascent field at this time has ultimately proved a hindrance to the realization of the full potential of the kinesiology project. I am, of course, not looking to renounce Franklin Henry’s (1964) significance to the development of the field; the process of subdisciplinization was probably the most-strategic means of legitimizing and advancing physical education as a field of intellectual inquiry (I certainly cannot formulate a better one). It was a necessary step but one whose very success (in terms of its adoption and virtual hegemony) has contributed to the bifurcation of the field into departments with either an *exclusive focus* (largely biological/human science in orientation, having *triumphed* over the social scientific/humanities insurgents) or a guise of 1960s-style subdisciplinization (often fraught with *internal strife* between competing and seemingly irreconcilable factions with little or no interest in the field’s potentially uniting empirical focus).

There are, clearly, few winners in this type of academic bifurcation and contestation, and kinesiology as a field is undoubtedly the real loser. In our defense, and from the vantage point offered to us by more than four decades of hindsight, subdisciplinarity was always going to be an unsustainable project for a field of inquiry seeking to coalesce around a defined empirical locus. The integrative ambitions of kinesiology simply cannot be realized through adherence to rigid subdisciplinarity because it precludes the type of empirically driven disciplinary synthesis that kinesiology demands. I do not wish, however, to spend my time
advancing the integrative capacities of transdisciplinary or even antidisciplinary approaches (although Medicus’s work is intriguing). Rather, I would prefer to address the epistemological hierarchy (privileging particular ways of knowing over others) currently operating within kinesiology and, indeed, the academy in general. Thus, I turn to the process of scientization (Whitson & Macintosh, 1990), of which subdisciplinarity was clearly an important feature, that has come to dominate and define the kinesiology landscape.

This is not meant to be a defensive attack on science qua science, merely an observation or interpretations as to why particular ways of knowing have become privileged over others within particular social and historical contexts. Whether we choose to realize it or not, it is the context in which kinesiology has been, and is being, disciplined and institutionalized that has had the most profound impact on the nature of the field. As Kuhn (1970) suggested, particular regimes of power are underpinned by specific regimes of truth, and vice versa. The rational productivity ethos of liberal capitalist society finds its epistemic corroboration in the positivist objectivism that underpins the scientific method, as conventionally understood. Both are constituents, and simultaneously constitutors, of a particular understanding of modernity, centered around linear evolutionary assumptions pertaining to the inevitable progress of human civilization through the advancement of empirically grounded—often a euphemism for quantitatively driven and objectively reasoned—science. Hence, the scientific hegemony currently in place within kinesiology speaks less about the veracity of the scientific method per se, as it does about the political economy of the corporate university and the broader political, economic, cultural, and technological context in which the process of corporatization exists and operates (Daniels, Blasch, & Caster, 2000; Rutherford, 2005).

The militarily inspired climate of educational/scientific accountability that prompted the climate of subdisciplinization in the early 1960s has been replaced by a complex amalgam of bureaucratic, military, and corporate interests responsible for advancing not only science per se but a particularly narrow and, some have argued, regressive understanding of, and role for, science within society. It is such pressures that, according to Dan Hind (2007), have compromised the perceived rationality and value-free Enlightenment practices on which the scientific method is founded. Of course, I do not need to lecture you regarding the politics of state and corporate research funding, which privilege particular types of, and foci for, scientific endeavor. The science you currently practice might be, to some degree, counter to your purist scientific sensibilities; such are the extrinsic pressures on the neoliberal scientist’s craft. As Hind noted, “Default science becomes what corporations want, and progress becomes what the US military can impose on the world” (2007, p. 9). Suffice to say that the influences on contemporary scientific endeavor are as much attributable to the legacies of Milton Friedman and Leo Strauss (the architects of neoliberal economics and neoconservative politics, respectively) as they are to those of Enrico Fermi and colleagues.

Far from reveling in the anticipated fruits of a postscarcity society (Chernomas, 1984; Giddens, 1995), today’s advanced capitalist formation has become associated with evermore intensifying periods of economic stringency resulting, among other things, in significant reductions in levels of state funding to public universities. This has had profound effects on the structure and experience of university life because the university is expected to become both leaner and meaner in its
operation and intent (Harrison, 1997). The university’s increasingly alienated workers—that is us, the faculty, and our even more exploited graduate students—are expected to continually increase productivity levels, while receiving little or no increase in support: the contemptuous doing more with less mantra. Furthermore, the seemingly perpetual fiscal climate has also had an effect on compromising our academic freedom through the unremitting and obsequious fetishising of externally generated grant funding. The actions of public and private funding bodies have made it apparent that the nearer one approaches the “gold standard” of randomized experimental design, the more one is likely to receive funding for doing “objective and good science,” and the larger that funding is likely to be (Lather, 2006, p. 32). The contemporary university is, if nothing else, a pragmatic environment and has responded to this corporate and “governmental manipulation of science” by reinforcing the primacy of “high-quality science” (Lather, 2006, pp. 35, 34). Such are the laws of the neoliberal academic jungle: an academic and economic order in which primacy is afforded to rationally conceived, objective knowledge, with critical and reflexive forms of intellectualizing coming under increasing pressure (Denzin & Giardina, 2006). Indeed, over the past decade or so, there has been a backlash against various forms of subjective, interpretive, and constructivist thought that is as much economic in its derivation as it is epistemological in its effects. Academic freedom meets fiscal constraint, resulting in widespread intellectual compliance to the corporate scientific norm; with little, or no, guarantee that science and scientific thought, as classically understood, are actually being advanced.

The neophyte, and therefore self-consciously vulnerable, discipline of kinesiology has been efficiently co-opted into the self-legitimizing hegemony of evidenced-based natural science. Although unfortunate, it is wholly understandable why those commanding the precarious kinesiology amalgam should privilege the epistemic order (science) that is most-readily rewarded, and thereby valued, by managerialist administrators. In doing so, however, economic considerations now come to augment the normalized scientism evident within the kinesiology community, a stance that asserts that the (natural) scientific method takes primacy over all others, regardless of the focus of empirical inquiry. This “first positivist assumption” by Westkott rests on the claim (long since discredited) that “the methods appropriate for studying the natural world are equally appropriate for the study of human experience” (Lather, 2006, p. 33). Yet, the ways of knowing associated with the active body/human movement are not the exclusive domain of the quantitative data-driven logical positivist. Let us not forget, the active body is as much a social, cultural, philosophical, and historical entity as it is a genetic, physiological, and psychological vessel and needs to be engaged as such through rigorous ethnographic, autoethnographic, textual and discursive, socio-historic treatment. The aim of qualitative inquiry is to generate otherwise inaccessible interpretations and understandings of the active body/human movement; such social and cultural phenomena simply cannot be imagined, let alone approached, using a logical positivists predilection for identifying and testing the existence of objective rationalities.

Despite my self-evident epistemological and methodological proclivities, I would stress that neither positivism nor postpositivism, quantitative nor qualitative approaches should be privileged one over the other. If we are adherents to the belief that kinesiology is both a comprehensive and integrated approach to
the study of human movement, the field simply cannot develop through a blind, antagonistic, or exclusive adherence to either scientific, social scientific, or, for that matter, humanities, approaches. A true kinesiology program, in name and intent, requires a complimentary synthesis of epistemologies if it is to realize its diverse and multifaceted empirical project. Moreover, the scientific hegemony evident within kinesiology might be comforting to some, but ultimately it is disenabling to the field as a whole because it necessarily privileges one way of knowing over others (if only the quest for knowledge were so straightforward). Hence, within kinesiology departments, those advocating social and cultural dimensions of analysis are forced to engage in a continuous (and in some cases ultimately losing) struggle for their very existence; oftentimes they have been simply written out of the curriculum and programmatic offerings. The subtext—from colleagues and administrators alike—for those who do survive the social science/humanities cull is that they should be thankful for their very existence (“look what happened at Berkeley, University of Washington, etc.”). To some, we are clearly the Victorian child who, if they are to be seen, definitely should not be heard. Yet, I would argue that failure to fully acknowledge and support the contribution of socially, culturally, and historically focused research, precludes the actualization of kinesiology’s expansive intellectual promise. It is time the broader kinesiological community started to listen. Yet, despite the aforementioned epistemological and ideological impediments—for, rather than providing a corrective to ideology, the scientific method is itself ideological when it is advanced as the only valid or legitimate way of knowing (McKay, Gore, & Kirk, 1990)—and arguably since its phase of inception, the sociology of sport community has also been partially culpable in contributing toward its marginal status within kinesiology and beyond.

2. (Re)Turning to Physical Culture

I have to confess to being unsure as to why sport should have become the default descriptor during the process of the subdisciplinization of physical education. I now believe, however, that its adoption and continued use have proved to be severely limiting. Sport is a vague and imprecise noun that fails to capture the empirical breadth of the work carried out within the sociology of sport. In what the poststructuralists among us would refer to as a sea of empty signifiers, sport is arguably one of the most-highly contested and least useful nouns with which to frame an area of study. As Alan Tomlinson (2002) rightly identified, the involved etymology of sport speaks to its spatial and historical specificity. If culture, according to Raymond Williams (1981), is one of the most complex words in the English language, then sport cannot be far behind, and the notion of sport culture is an almost ironic statement of ambiguity. Moreover, for those of us working within departments of kinesiology—and for that matter, schools of public health—I would suggest that a narrow sport focus is neither feasible nor, in fact, appropriate. Sport cannot and should not be ignored or shunned as it is by some elements of the kinesiology community, doubtless fearful of its populist and anti-intellectual associations. Neither should it be the exclusive curricular or research focus. Rather, sport has to be considered one, of many, constituent elements within the broader domain of physical culture. Only by expanding our empirical reach into the diverse landscape of physical culture,
can we legitimately contribute to the integrative project of kinesiology as critical and culturally focused intellectuals, teachers, and researchers.

We, at Maryland, have decided to embrace and activate the term physical culture as a means of announcing and directing our particular object of study within a graduate research group whose previous names had included Sport Commerce and Culture, and Sport Studies. At one time, I might have pressed for the Sociology of Sport as a replacement program title. However, at this juncture, it is neither intellectually appropriate nor politically expedient to do so. There is a plausible argument to be made that the sociology of sport, as practiced and exhibited within its numerous journals and at its various conferences, is neither exclusively sociological nor is it exclusively focused on sport. In terms of the former, and as with the field of sociology at large, there has been a pronounced and prolonged engagement with a variety of cultural theories and culturally oriented research methodologies. In addition, and perhaps enabled by the turn to cultural theory and method, the range of sociology of sport research has expanded to incorporate the empirical domains of fitness, dance, exercise, movement, wellness, and health. Rather than an “expressive totality” coalescing around sport, the sociology of sport is, in actuality, characterized by a “unity-in-difference” (Clarke, 1991, p. 17)—the unifying element being a commitment toward understanding various expressions or iterations of the physical. I would respectfully suggest that the very term, the sociology of sport, is in fact a misnomer. That having been said, I see little point in reprising discussions focused on the name of the field in general. For us locally, however, I do feel it is important to mobilize nomenclature (Physical Cultural Studies) that actually describes what we do at Maryland. Whether this has purchase beyond College Park and its environs will, of course, depend on the quality, prescience, and insightfulness of the research with which it becomes associated.

It is interesting that our programmatic shift represents a return to the department’s origins; on its inception in the 1890s, it was titled the Department of Physical Culture. Physical culture is a complex term with a considerable and diverse history. For many, it conjures up late 19th and early 20th century, Eugene Sandow and Bernarr Macfadden-esque allusions pertaining to the cultivation of the physical through various exercise regimes. Whereas others are no doubt reminded of the mass gymnastic exhibitions of the German Turner and Czech Sokol movements, which preempted to the emergence of the “Spartakiad” spectacles of Soviet collective physicality. More recently, Newell provided a rationale for why physical culture should not be used as a department title:

Scholars at the socio-cultural end of the physical activity continuum are often attracted to this label because it gives them direct recognition. However, it has not caught on, and it seems it will not in the near future, in part because of its perceived linkage to the body-building world. (Newell, 1990a, p. 275)

Although not destined to challenge kinesiology’s supremacy, in a lesser capacity as the descriptor for a complex empirical domain, physical culture has become increasingly used within the critical intellectual community. Indeed, one commentator even described it as “muscling its way into academia” (Smishek, 2004). Examples of this physical cultural insurgency include Adair’s (1998) historical account of Australasian physical culture; McDonald’s (1999) examination of the
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relationship between physical culture and Hindu nationalism; Pronger’s (1998) provocative treatise on the boundaries of that which constitutes physical culture; and, most significantly, the late Alan Ingham’s (1997) hugely significant “Toward a Department of Physical Cultural Studies and an End to Tribal Warfare,” and Hargreaves and Vertinsky’s definitive anthology “Physical Culture, Power, and the Body” (Hargreaves & Vertinsky, 2007).

There are a number of reasons for the noticeable migration from sport to physical culture, not least of which was the intensifying cultural turn within sociology from the 1980s onward, which made a sociology of the body/embodied sociology an evermore important (if, in some quarters, divisive) component of the sociology project. Thus, a proliferation of conferences and research publications focused on the critical cultural analysis of the corporeal placed the body at the forefront of the intellectual agenda. In Frank’s (1990) terms, the body had been brought back in. Whereas we often berate ourselves for not being at the forefront of such intellectual trends, in this case, the sociology of sport community proved to be unusually proactive, being at the forefront of the search for the absent body (Loy, 1991). From my observance, this can be attributed to a palpable dissatisfaction with the largely disembodied nature of sociology of sport research in the preceding two decades (sociological studies of the active body were carried out; however, they were the exception rather than the rule, and the field as a whole seemed to avoid issues pertaining to the body and embodiment; Loy, Andrews, & Rinehart, 1993). From the mid/late 1980s, sociology of sport researchers conclusively (re)discovered the body (and thereby issues of physicality) as the empirical core of the field of study onward (c.f. Gruneau, 1991; Hargreaves, 1986, 1987; Harvey & Sparks, 1991; Ingham, 1985). Thus ensued a collective awakening to the fact that the body “constitutes the most striking symbol, as well as constituting the material core of sporting activity” (Hargreaves, 1987, p. 141). Once the sociology of sport acknowledged its unavoidably embodied focus, the field gradually broke from its preoccupation with sporting and broadened its empirical scope to include a wider range of physical cultural forms. Thus, the proliferation of critical and theoretically driven cultural analyses of various dimensions of physicality (including, but not restricted to, sport, exercise, fitness, dance, and movement practices) has led to the tacit physical culturalization of the sociology of sport (or at the very least, a sizeable constituency of it).

Of course, virtually all aspects of human life are, to some degree, implicated within the physical. As a consequence, it is important to consider the empirical boundaries through which this approach can be managed. Thus, we have formulated an understanding of physicality focused on bodily movement and activity. According to this understanding, the various dimensions of physical activity combine to form a complex and diverse cultural sphere through which personal experiences, meanings, and subjectivities become dialectically linked to, and negotiated through, broader social, political, economic, and technological contingencies. Such an approach echoes Vertinsky’s (quoted in Smishek, 2004, p. 11) understanding of physical culture as those “cultural practices in which the physical body—the way it moves, is represented, has meanings assigned to it, and is imbued with power—is central.” The contextuality of physical culture is well illustrated with the 1930s Soviet Socialist understanding and mobilization of the active body. Specifically, mass health and fitness programs designed to construct the healthy (physically

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subjects—the “new Soviet person”—demanded for the success and defense of the Soviet revolution. Physical culture within this context, and particularly expectations of individual vigor, activity, and health, were mobilized in the advancement of a collectivist and productivist subjectivity: an embodied “anti-materialist aesthetic” that “condemned consumerism as bourgeois and hedonistic. The ideal new Soviet person focused on production, not consumption, and rejected decadence” (Randall, 2004, p. 966). Thus, Soviet state–organized physical culture linked vigorous bodies to vigorous workers (embodied by the Stakhanovite ideal), a vigorous citizenry, and a vigorous nation. Although similarly advancing an idealized subject, the physical cultural experiences and meanings associated with contemporary late-capitalist society represent the antithesis of the Soviet model. Within the context of an advanced consumer-capitalist marketplace, the healthy body becomes one of a compendium of status commodities within one’s lifestyle assemblage (Howell & Ingham, 2001). Thereby, anchored within bourgeois notions of individual responsibility and morality with regard to physical health and fitness, an idealized national subjectivity is advanced through the expression of carefully prescribed exercise practices and fitness outcomes. Hence, in privileging and celebrating particular classed, race, gendered, and sexed bodies, as it pathologizes and demonizes others, physical culture plays an important role in, quite literally, embodying and advancing the moralizing and self-righteous tyranny of neoliberal individualism (Giroux, 2004).

The basic understanding of physical culture developed herein interrupts the naturalist assumptions pertaining to the body. These have allowed the human sciences to claim the body as their own. As Hargreaves noted, “Scientific discourse and common sense combine to naturalize the ‘truth’ about the body so that its historicity and its significance in the constitution of social relations is obscured” (1987, p. 139). Developing a similar point, Ingham made the crucial observation that understandings of the physical body should not replicate mind–body dualisms, because the body is simultaneously a physical and cultural entity and needs to be addressed as such: “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” (Ingham, 1997, p. 176). Unpacking Ingham’s words, bodies—and the subjectivities they inhabit, perform, and embody—might appear natural (an authentic expression of some biological essence), yet this masks their socio-cultural constitution (Pronger, 1998). If this is true of the body in general, then it is perhaps even more applicable to the manner in which the active body is culturally regulated, practiced, and materialized. As are power and power relations, so is the active body, and its related experiences, meanings, and subjectivities, dialectically linked to social and historical contingencies. Ingham offers this:

We need to know how social structures and cultures impact our social presentation of our “embodied” selves and how our embodied selves reproduce and transform structures and cultures; how our attitudes towards our bodies relate to our self- and social identities. (Ingham, 1997, p. 176)

Differently put, we have to identify and analyze how dominant power structures become expressed in, and through, socially and historically contingent embodied
experiences, meanings, and subjectivities. Such is the preoccupation of physical cultural studies, to which I now turn.

3. A Synthetic Physical Cultural Studies

Having identified physical culture as the empirical framework and focus necessary for the furtherance of a comprehensive and integrative kinesiology, the next question is, What is to be done with it? How do we use and engage physical culture in meaningful and productive ways? As an ongoing response to this question, we are in the midst of developing physical cultural studies, effectively, a synthesis of empirical, theoretical, and methodological influences drawn from, among other sources, the sociology and history of sport and physical activity, the sociology of the body, and cultural studies. In her comprehensive overview, Harris (2006) offered the conclusion that

As long as there is agreement on conceptualizing “sociology of sport” to include a broad range of phenomena related to various forms of physical activity and societal conceptions of human bodies, and as long as it is inclusive of a variety of social science perspectives, this name will probably be acceptable to most. (p. 87)

The integrative nature of the work being carried out at Maryland, however, meant that the use of the term sociology of sport would reproduce the type of intellectual boundaries and exclusivities we are attempting to transcend. Thus, we turned to the term physical cultural studies as a means of encompassing the breadth and depth of our necessarily integrated project. Clearly, physical cultural studies is a field very much in its infancy, and one that will, doubtless, benefit from the critical dialogue it will hopefully generate. To introduce it, I thought it best to refer to the working, and thereby highly fluid, definitional statement that we have developed. I will then unpack this description by providing some insights into its core elements.

Physical Cultural Studies (PCS) advances the critical and theoretical analysis of physical culture, in all its myriad forms. These include sport, exercise, health, dance, and movement related practices, which PCS research locates and analyzes within the broader social, political, economic, and technological contexts in which they are situated. More specifically, PCS is dedicated to the contextually based understanding of the corporeal practices, discourses, and subjectivities through which active bodies become organized, represented, and experienced in relation to the operations of social power. PCS thus identifies the role played by physical culture in reproducing, and sometimes challenging, particular class, ethnic, gender, ability, generational, national, racial, and/or sexual norms and differences. Through the development and strategic dissemination of potentially empowering forms of knowledge and understanding, PCS seeks to illuminate, and intervene into, sites of physical cultural injustice and inequity. Furthermore, since physical culture is both manifest and experienced in different forms, PCS adopts a multi-method approach toward engaging the empirical (including ethnography and
autoethnography, participant observation, discourse and media analysis, and contextual analysis). PCS advances an equally fluid theoretical vocabulary, utilizing concepts and theories from a variety of disciplines (including cultural studies, economics, history, media studies, philosophy, sociology, and urban studies) in engaging and interpreting the particular aspect of physical culture under scrutiny.

Ontological Complexity

There are, evidently, numerous ways of being physically active. According to Pace Frow and Morris (2000), the empirical field of physical culture can be considered an ontologically mixed entity. Ingham (1997) identified the exercise, health, movement, recreation, and sport-related dimensions of physical culture (to which one could probably add the pedagogic, work, and ADL: Activities of Daily Living). Each of these spheres possesses a “relative autonomy” (Hall, 1981) in relation to each other in as much as they incorporate (quite literally) different motivations for, and practices of, organizing and regulating human movement. It needs to be reiterated, however, that the boundaries marking the various facets of physical culture are necessarily fluid, dynamic, and thereby always likely to encourage processes of contamination, something which makes sectoral delineation, at best, contingent, suggestive, and approximate, but nonetheless necessary, for the purposes of empirical analysis. It should also be noted that physical culture’s ontological complexity is compounded by the fact that each of its various dimensions can be engaged or experienced in multiple ways. For each of them, the active body is something that can either be experienced (by the instrumental subject) or observed (as a representational object). Hence, PCS encompasses a breadth of empirical sites and experiences. To illustrate this diversity, I would draw attention to the following studies, which although they might not have identified themselves as such, are boundary-marking exemplars of the PCS project: “Disciplining Bodies at Risk: Cardiac Rehabilitation and the Medicalization of Fitness” (Wheatley, 2005); Cheerleading and the Gendered Politics of Sport (Grindstaff & West, 2006); “Globalization and Globesity: The Impact of the 2008 Beijing Olympics in China” (Dickson & Schofield, 2005); “Pink Ribbons, Inc.: Breast Cancer and the Politics of Philanthropy” (King, 2006); “Three-Block Fathers: Spatial Perceptions and Kin-Work in Low-Income African American Neighborhoods” (Roy, 2004); “Inscribing Healthification: Governance, Risk, Surveillance and the Subjects and Spaces of Fitness and Health” (Fusco, 2006); “Playing with Fire: Masculinity, Health, and Sports Supplements” (Atkinson, 2007); “Rumbles in the Jungle: Boxing, Racialization and the Performance of Masculinity” (Woodward, 2004); “Classification of Disabled Athletes: (Dis)Empowering the Paralympic Practice Community” (Howe & Jones, 2006); “Working Out in Japan: Shaping the Female Body in Tokyo Fitness Clubs” (Spielvogel, 2003); “Managing the Toll of Stripping: Boundary Setting Among Exotic Dancers” (Barton, 2007); “From Social Problem to Personal Issue: The Language of Lifestyle” (Howell & Ingham, 2001); “Death to the Prancing Prince’: Effeminacy, Sport Discourses and the Salvation of Men’s Dancing” (Adams, 2005); and “Be Very Afraid: Cyborg Athletes, Transhuman Ideals and Posthumanity” (Miah, 2003). Clearly, the ontological complexity of physical culture (ranging as it does from the production and
consumption of embodied performance through the production and consumption of mediated representations of various forms of embodiment) encourages a methodological dynamism that requires the PCS researcher to become proficient within a range of qualitative and interpretive approaches.

**Context and Contingency**

The PCS project is significantly informed by the “Hallian” (McGuigan, 2006) version of cultural studies that emerged and developed at the University of Birmingham, England’s, Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies (CCCS) in the 1960s and subsequently globalized to the extent that arguably the most-productive venues for cultural studies research are now to be found in North America and Australasia (Grossberg, 1997b; Lee, 2003). For the purposes of brevity, cultural studies can be characterized as a critical sensibility and approach toward interpreting culture’s role in the construction and experience of the “lived milieux of power” (Grossberg, 1997a, p. 8). PCS consciously incorporates this concern with excavating how the active bodies become organized, represented, and experienced in relation to the operations of social power. Moreover, it does so in a manner that faithfully imitates another cultural studies precept: it is radically contextual in its approach and intent (Andrews, 2002).

To operate within a contextual PCS strategy means recognizing that physical cultural forms (practices, discourses, and subjectivities, etc.) can only be understood by the way in which they are articulated into a particular set of complex social, economic, political, and technological relationships that comprise the social context, recognizing that “There are no necessary correspondences in history, but history is always the production of such connections or correspondences” (Grossberg, 1992, p. 53). As the Marx of the *Grundrisse* informed us, determinate relations do exist, they just cannot be guaranteed in advance, hence, a Physical Culture Without Guarantees (c.f. Hall, 1996). The various dimensions of physical culture can never be substantial (possessing some fixed, immutable essential form); rather, they are unavoidably relational and always in process, their contemporaneous iteration providing a persuasive—if illusionary—semblance of fixity within what is, in actuality, an ever-changing world. In the broadest sense, with its domineering presence within contemporary life, 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. Physical culture thus incorporates numerous “events,” the moments of “practice that crystallizes diverse temporal and social trajectories” (Frow & Morris, 2000, p. 352) through which individuals negotiate their subjective—and for our interests, embodied—identities and experiences. Power operates multidimensionally and multidirectionally; therefore, the role of critical contextual analysis is not to involve oneself in some teleological determinism based on *a priori* assumptions about the effectivity and direction of power, but rather to discern the state of conjunctural power relations, directions, and effects, the “state of play in cultural relations” (Hall, 1981, p. 235). Hence, the practice or method of
PCS involves identifying an “event,” almost in an abstract sense, that represents a potential important focus of critical inquiry (in as much as it is implicated in hierarchical, iniquitous, unjust power relations and effects). Thus follows a process of connecting and articulating this “event” to the multiple material, institutional, and discursive determinations that suture the event—in a dialectic sense—into the conjuncture of which it is a constituent element. The commitment to, and practice of, articulation thus involves “starting with the particular, the detail, the scrap of ordinary or banal existence, and then working to unpack the density of relations and of intersecting social domains that inform it” (Frow & Morris, 2000, p. 354). Such a dialectic method and approach also presumes that, while physical cultural “events” (the moments of practice) are produced from specific social and historic contexts, they are also actively engaged in the ongoing constitution of the conditions out of which they emerge.

**Power and Politics**

The practice of PCS assumes that societies are fundamentally divided along hierarchically ordered lines of differentiation (i.e., those based on class, ethnic, gender, ability, generational, national, racial, and/or sexual norms), as realized through the operations of power and power relations within the social formation.

*Power* operates at every level of human life; it is neither an abstract universal structure nor a subjective experience. It is both limiting and productive: producing differences, shaping relations, structuring identities and hierarchies, but also enabling practices and empowering social subjects. . . . At the level of social life, power involves the historical production of “economies”—the social production, distribution, and consumption—of different forms of value (e.g., capital, money, meanings, information, representations, identities, desires, emotions, pleasures). It is the specific articulation of social subjects into these circuits of value, circuits which organize social possibilities and differences, that constructs the structured inequalities of social power. (Grossberg, 1989, p. ■)

PCS contends that the various dimensions of physical culture represent moments at which such social divisions are imposed, experienced, and at times contested. PCS is thus driven by the need to understand the complexities, experiences, and injustices of the physical cultural context it confronts (particularly in relation to the relations, operations, and effects of power). Hence, at its most fundamental level, PCS seeks to “construct a political history of the (physical cultural) present” (Grossberg, 2006, p. 2) through which it becomes possible to construct politically expedient physical cultural possibilities out of the historical circumstances it confronts.

PCS is motivated by an unequivocal “commitment to progressive social change” (Miller, 2001, p. 1)■ and thereby struggles to produce the type of knowledge through which it would be in a position to intervene into the broader social world and *make a difference*. One often-overlooked consequence of this is that PCS’s relationship with theory is necessary, yet ambivalent, and certainly unpredictable. As within the cultural studies project itself, the mobilization of social and cultural theorizing is “never about finding ‘the right theory,’ or demonstrating one’s theoretical acumen, or...
playing some theoretical chess game of one-up-manship. It is about understanding what is going on, and therefore, it is about finding out whatever theoretical positions will enable that project” (Wright, 2001, p. 134). PCS rests on a form of “performative pedagogy” (Giroux, 2001, p. 7) in which empirical theorizing becomes the basis for “intervening into contexts and power . . . in order to enable people to act more strategically in ways that may change their context for the better” (Grossberg, 1996, p. 143 in (Giroux, 2001)). PCS is thus political in the sense of identifying and analyzing—and thereby seeking to intervene into—the operation and experience of power and power relations (sometimes liberatory, oftentimes repressive, frequently both) through the examination of the contested and complex realm of physical culture. Yet, in precisely what form and at precisely what sites does this intervention into the structures and operations of power take place? Carrington (2001) offers a three-pronged (to which I have added a fourth) model outlining the primary sites of intervention for PCS researchers: teaching spaces (broadly defined), emancipatory politics, cultural policy, and the public sphere. My sense is that, as individuals with politically interventionist obligations, PCS researchers have to continually examine what, and where, our critical intellectualizing both challenges and informs. For, if they are to hold true to the commitments of a critical and public pedagogy (Giroux, 2000, 2001; Grossberg, 2006; McLaren, 1991), PCS researchers must remain vigilant in their struggle against “the disconnection” that will surely occur if we forsake the political imperative and allow our physical cultural studies to be “inhabited for merely academic purposes” by producing studies in which physical cultural forms are divorced from contextual analyses of “power and social possibilities” (Johnson, 1996, p. 78).

**Conclusion**

The late Alan Ingham (1997) identified the adoption of physical culture, as a department name and focus, as a possible solution to the “tribal warfare” afflicting kinesiology. As ever, Ingham challenged convention and orthodoxy, but on this occasion, I feel his prescription, while wholly appropriate, was simply too bold. Physical culture might not be a feasible label and focus for the field at large. However, PSC (or alternative means of engaging the social, cultural, and historic realms of inquiry) should be a more-readily visible, equitably supported, and consensually acknowledged constituent of the field at large. This is because excellence and comprehensiveness are inseparable elements of the broader kinesiological project. I, therefore, would offer the suggestion that a program that is not truly inclusive and comprehensive cannot be considered a credible example of the kinesiological beast (I believe this is acknowledged and addressed within the criteria for the AAKPE doctoral program rankings, and so it should be).

Kinesiology’s whole has to be considered greater than the sum of its constituent elements. To further the kinesiology project and to simultaneously counter the corporatist scientism of the contemporary university—something we presently, if unwittingly advance—it seems to be a simple choice. Either we develop truly comprehensive and integrative approaches to the study of human movement (incorporating everything from the genomic to the societal levels) or we end up using *kinesiology* as a euphemism for a collection of tangentially related, scientific
endeavors (whose external disciplinary allegiances add little, if anything, to the broader remit of kinesiology). For this reason, we in PSC refuse to doff our caps in due deference to the denizens of kinesiological science, whose self-perceived benevolence allows for the accommodating of social, cultural, and historical fields of inquiry. Without PCS, they are integrative biology (whatever that is); with PCS we are able to realize the promise of kinesiology. This might be an inconvenient truth to some, but one that we, as a field, neglect at our peril.

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