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**Towards a theoretical perspective of “vibrant physicality”:**  
From “sociology of the body” to an “embodied sociology” and beyond

Author: Mary Fraser Berndtsson  
Kandidatuppsats: SOCK01, 15 hp  
Kursnivå C  
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Handledare: Birgitta Ericson

# Abstract

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This paper presents a sketch of a theoretical perspective to aid in the sociological understanding of the phenomenon of “vibrant physicality”. “Vibrant physicality” is an enjoyable, embodied feeling which often results from and motivates participation in fitness practice. Yet, despite its importance, it has been neglected in existing theoretical and empirical literature. To address this gap, a theoretical perspective is proposed based on the following concepts: Merleau-Ponty’s “body-subject”, Leder’s “dys-appearance”, Shusterman’s pragmatic somaesthetics, and Csordas’s “embodiment” as process. The “vibrant physicality” perspective is then grounded in existential sociology’s insistence on the importance of feeling states in social life. It is further suggested that methods proposed by existential sociologists can be useful tools for the empirical investigation of “vibrant physicality”. Implications of the “vibrant physicality” perspective for the sociological study of practice more generally are also considered.

Keywords: body, sociology of the body, embodiment, body-subject,  
existential sociology, vibrant physicality, fitness

# Contents

<b>1) INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>3</b>
Research question, purpose, background, and approach .....	3
Outline of the paper .....	4
Delimiting remarks .....	5
<b>2) DEFINING THE PROBLEM.....</b>	<b>6</b>
The what and where of “vibrant physicality” .....	6
“The embodied pleasures of a vibrant physicality” .....	6
Locating “vibrant physicality” in empirical sites : “Fitness” and Reflexive Body Techniques .....	7
Locating “vibrant physicality” in sociological theory: “Sociology of the body” and “embodied sociology” .....	9
<b>3) TOWARDS A SOLUTION: SKETCHING A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE OF “VIBRANT PHYSICALITY” .....</b>	<b>11</b>
Embodying the subject: Merleau-Ponty’s repudiation of mind-body dualism through the “body-subject” .....	12
Cartesian dualism as a problem for “vibrant physicality” .....	12
Merleau-Ponty’s body-subject .....	13
The body-subject and “vibrant physicality” .....	16
Experiencing “vibrant physicality”: Leder’s “dys-appearance” and Shusterman’s “reappearance” in body-conscious practices .....	17
“Body” and “embodiment”: Object and process and the “vibrant physicality” perspective .....	21
Chapter summary.....	22
<b>4) THE “VIBRANT PHYSICALITY” PERSPECTIVE AS A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH.....</b>	<b>22</b>
A sociological approach to “Vibrant physicality”: revisiting existential sociology, an emotional sociology of the everyday.....	22
The “vibrant physicality” perspective and sociology: Strengths and limitations.....	25
<b>5) CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>29</b>

# 1) Introduction

## Research question, purpose, background, and approach

When I go down to the gym, I go there with a goal in mind, and when I come out of there I nearly always feel that I've had a brilliant workout. 'God, that was brilliant!' I feel powerful, I feel strong, I feel energetic. It's just a nice feeling (excerpt from interview with male bodybuilder, cited in Monaghan 2001: 347).

[Exercise makes me feel] great! I like the movement and the music... Tonight it was hard, and I'd had a tough day, and my back was aching, and, really I should have rested, but I know that I feel so much better when I've been... It's great. It makes me feel great, because you can switch off and not think about anything for a while (excerpt from interview with female group exercise participant, cited in Maguire & Mansfield 1998: 132).

This paper is a sketch of the beginnings of a sociological, theoretical perspective for understanding the embodied/physical/emotional pleasures people often experience in and around “fitness” practices. Monaghan (2001) argues that this phenomenon—“the embodied pleasures of a vibrant physicality”—has been under-theorized within the sociologies of “the body”, sport, health and illness, and in sociology more generally. This problem reflects what Shilling (2003: 179) has termed a paradoxical “absent presence” of “the body” in sociological “body” theories. He explains that “while the body [has] become an undoubted stimulant to the sociological imagination it still [tends] to fade from view in favour of a concern with more traditional analytic concerns” (ibid.). As a result, most empirical studies of “fitness” practices neglect the inescapable lived physicality of the *practicing* in favor of the wider sociological role of the practice (Monaghan 2001; Hockey & Allen Collinson 2007).

Thus this paper is an attempt to develop a theoretical perspective of “vibrant physicality” that can aid in the understanding of the “lived” experiences of “fitness” practices. It was written in response to a specific, personal conundrum I experienced while doing ethnographic fieldwork to investigate motivation in group exercise classes<sup>1</sup>. Most of the sociological literature on group exercise is written from an explicitly feminist perspective and is highly critical of the *practice* for its disempowering effects on female participants, while

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<sup>1</sup> Once known simply as “aerobics” classes, the group exercise class format now includes a much greater range of styles—“step” (involving the stepping on and off a platform); “pump” (endurance and body shaping moves incorporating free weights); aero-box and other martial arts inspired forms; “latin”, “hip hop” and other dance-inspired forms; and mind-body classes involving yoga and Pilates fusion, etc. Even so, the format remains largely the same: participants mirror an instructor’s body movements in time to music by following his or her visual and verbal cues. Group exercise classes commonly take place in commercial health clubs or non-profit fitness organization such as the YMCA (see Felstead et. al. 2007).

admitting that sometimes participants experience it as enjoyable and empowering<sup>2</sup>. Yet the empirical material I was collecting through full participant observation and qualitative interviews—through actively *practicing* and speaking with fellow *practicers*—seemed to suggest that the classes were experienced as immediate, physical, and pleasurable, and above all *embodied*. What theoretical perspective could be used to explore this reality sociologically without it “fading from view”?

The search for such a perspective began in theoretical literature on “the sociology of the body” and it quickly became apparent that while there has been a wide consensus over the past twenty years that there is a need to overcome Cartesian mind/body dualism and “to bring the body back in” to sociological theorizing, there is almost *no* agreement on how it can be achieved. In the words of Shilling it is “a diverse and increasingly fragmented field of studies” (2003: 211). This paper is the result of my attempt to navigate this field and provide a preliminary sketch of a theoretical perspective for coming to grips with the sociological phenomenon “vibrant physicality”. The following section provides an outline of the paper.

### **Outline of the paper**

The body of this paper consists of three chapters. The first, “Defining the Problem”, fleshes out the theoretical problem the “vibrant physicality” perspective is meant to address. The first section will introduce the concept of “vibrant physicality”, and the second will clarify it somewhat by briefly theorizing the embodied practices in which it occurs. The third section will provide an *extremely brief* summary of two major theoretical approaches to “the body” in sociology today—“the sociology of the body” and “embodied sociology”—and explain why the “embodied” approach provides a better basis for a “vibrant physicality” perspective. The next chapter “Towards a Solution” will provide the preliminary sketch of a “vibrant physicality” perspective which is at the heart of this paper. It will begin with a section that radically decenters and embodies the subject through Merleau-Ponty’s conception

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<sup>2</sup> The basic tone is illustrated by the following comment from Kagan & Morse, “[r]ather than mastering the environment around her, the participant... changes herself to fit the shape of the world’s expectations... The aerobics industry is like a factory in which motion becomes an instrument for dominating and shaping the body as an object” (1988: 177). Further examples are Lloyd (1996) who draws on Bordo and Foucault in her discursive analysis of texts on aerobics, and Maguire & Mansfield (1998) who draw on Eliasian notions of “insider-outsider” relations and the “civilizing process”. Markula (1995) looks at aerobics from a postmodern perspective, depicting it as a practice rendering female agents torn between a desire to live up to a body image constructed through Foucauldian discourse while simultaneously considering it ridiculous. Havaron Collins (2002), who explores the strategies women as agents use to make aerobics an empowering practice for themselves, provides a partial exception, though hers is still problematic. Crossley (2004) who draws on Bourdieu complemented by various other theorists to analyze participant experiences in a relatively more recent style of group fitness, “circuit training” has taken a decidedly more “embodied” view.

of the “body-subject”. The next section will draw on Leder’s concept of “dys-appearance” in the cases of pain and illness, and Schusterman’s arguments about the role of pleasure and conscious awareness of body in the case of reflexive practices, including “fitness” practices. The following section cites Csordas on embodiment as an ongoing process and methodology. The next chapter, “The ‘Vibrant Physicality’ Perspective as a Sociological Approach” argues that the concepts of the preceding chapter can be embedded in a sociological perspective, more specifically in existential sociology, a sociology of emotions and agency in everyday life. A second section briefly discusses some of the strengths and limitations of the sketched “vibrant physicality” perspective for sociological understanding of “vibrant physicality” and its practices. The final chapter of the paper is a short conclusion.

### **Delimiting remarks**

This paper might seem an overly ambitious project, so at the outset some delimiting remarks are in order. First, the theoretical perspective sketched is only intended as a *pragmatic*, preliminary tool to illuminate a specific empirical phenomenon, namely “vibrant physicality”. It is in no way meant to be a definitive statement within the ongoing “sociology of the body”/“embodiment” controversies, nor is it meant to discount the value of any other theoretical approach. Moreover it is a *sketch*, a suggestion, of what a theoretical perspective of “vibrant physicality” might be. Any extensive treatment is impossible in a paper of this length. Further, although empirically observable fitness practices and experiences of “vibrant physicality” will be considered theoretically, any systematic cataloging or mapping is beyond the scope of the paper. Finally, although concepts are drawn from philosophers (Merleau-Ponty, Leder, and Schusterman) and an anthropologist (Csordas), it is done in an attempt to suggest a *sociological* solution to the specific *sociological* problem of “vibrant physicality”. Thus, no critical treatment of these theories on philosophical or anthropological grounds is attempted.

## 2) Defining the Problem

### The what and where of “vibrant physicality”

#### “The embodied pleasures of a vibrant physicality”

The “vibrant physicality” perspective presented in this paper is meant to shed light on a sociological phenomenon that Monaghan (2001) has called “the embodied pleasures of a vibrant physicality”. As will become clear later in this paper, “vibrant physicality” is a preverbal experience of being-in-the-world, so it is a difficult one to pin down discursively. Nevertheless, some introductory remarks are in order. Monaghan points out that in the sociology of health and illness “health, for the most part, ‘is a state of being which is absent from consciousness and experienced only in its negation by disease and injury’” (2001: 331, with a citation from van Hooft). However, he argues, individuals “embroiled in the *positive moment*” of certain activities such as weight training often experience “representational and sensual pleasures... from their vibrant physicality” that are experienced as “beneficial to mental, physical and/or emotional health” (ibid., emphasis in original)<sup>3</sup>.

For the purposes of this paper, “vibrant physicality as a phenomenon is a *positive, immediate* experience of being embodied in this world. It is experienced positively in the sense of being pleasurable, but it can also be foregrounded in experience—it can be *felt* during and after bodily practices and can motivate one to participate in those practices<sup>4</sup>. To sum it up in a rather awkward way, “vibrant physicality” is the experience of *enjoying-being-one’s-body-doing-(or having done)-a physical practice*. It can involve, for example, the “pump” and “burn” of the weight trainer, or the “feel for the water” of the competitive-style

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<sup>3</sup> One of the central aims of Monaghan’s paper is to understand why bodybuilders, engaged as they are in building the physical capital of a “healthy body”, take illegal steroids even though they know it can damage the body. Monaghan argues that bodybuilding is a postmodern “fitness” practice as theorized by Glassner (1989) in which dualities such as “self” and “body”, and “inside” and “outside” have collapsed. The state of “looking good” in accordance with the cultural criteria of the bodybuilding community is entwined with sensual, bodily “feeling good”, so for Monaghan “the embodied pleasures of vibrant physicality” are made up of both aspects. Looking good and feeling good (or not) are experienced by bodybuilders as one and the same thing, so “steroid use” and “health” are not felt to be contradictory (Monaghan 2001). While I certainly would not disagree with Monaghan’s assertion that “looking good” and “feeling good” are often intimately related, the focus in my conception of “vibrant physicality” is different, because I believe it can be experienced in practices such as yoga, martial arts, and competitive sports where the external appearance of the physical body are less emphasized.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to emphasize here, however, that although “vibrant physicality” *can* be highlighted in conscious awareness while it is being experienced, this is relatively rare. Individuals are often so absorbed in enjoying-being-their-body-doing that they do not consciously reflect on this fact until later. As will become clear later in the paper, feelings are often fused with thoughts and actions, and can be experienced quite strongly without being specifically thematized in conscious thought at the time.

swimmer. It can involve “flow”<sup>5</sup>, a feeling of “optimal fulfillment and engagement in an activity, of being ‘in the zone’, where time just flies” as it is experienced in sports and exercise practices (Hockey & Allen Collinson 2007: 119) or the simple fun of performing choreographed moves with friends in a casual group exercise class. It can involve the deep, difficult attainment of mind-body awareness and unity during yogic practice<sup>6</sup>. It can also include the feeling of “feeling great” after a workout that is seen to have come as a result of that workout.

Moreover, while the “embodied pleasures of a vibrant physicality” can be experienced alone, as by a solitary jogger, it is important to emphasize that these pleasures are *always social* because the practices in which they arise are culturally determined—“social facts”—although they are often taken up voluntarily by individuals. This will become clearer in the next section, as these practices, or empirical “sites” are discussed.

#### *Locating “vibrant physicality” in empirical sites : “Fitness” and Reflexive Body Techniques*

Discussion of all possible circumstances for the experience of “vibrant physicality” is beyond the scope of this paper, as is an extended discussion of “fitness”. However, as the paper is aimed at outlining a theoretical perspective for understanding “vibrant physicality” as it is experienced during fitness practices, it is important to give a brief theoretical account of these practices. First, “fitness” is a highly contested term. While in the field of sports medicine it might be defined as a body’s strength, flexibility and cardiovascular endurance, people’s individual conceptions of what “fitness” means for them are far more complex. They involve inner feelings of capacity and well-being, but are also related to how individuals feel their bodies measure up to societal norms and expectations both as regards their appearance and “health” as medically (rather than phenomenologically) defined (Smith Maguire 2009: 1-2).

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<sup>5</sup> “Flow” as conceptualized by M. Csikszentmihalyi has been well documented in a variety of sports and physical activities, but it occurs in other areas of life. Jackson (2000) provides a concise explanation of what “flow” is and its considerable role in motivating individuals to engage in sports practices.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, in an interesting phenomenological study of the embodied experience of Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga, explains: “Often the exertions of this demanding practice challenge or disrupt the calm mind and controlled breathing that practitioners try to maintain. There are other, rarer moments in which these distractions fall away, when the practitioner finds their attention drawn into their body, into the form of the āsana (‘pose’ or ‘posture’...) or vinyāsa (‘movements’). This focus brings a deepening of attention into the pose, the muscles and the breath. It is at these moments that the practitioner is said to be ‘really doing yoga’” (2007: 26, with a citation from Baranay).



For the purpose of this paper, “fitness” practices will be defined in terms of Crossley’s (2006) concept of reflexive body techniques (RBTs). Crossley develops his concept of RBTs from Mauss’s theory of body techniques—the varying “ways in which from society to society men [sic] know how to use their bodies” (Mauss, in Crossley 2006: 103). People from different societies, and differently positioned people within the same society display different “body techniques”, different ways of walking, talking, eating, etc. These techniques, Crossley argues, are central to Mauss’s conception of the “habitus”. In Mauss’s words:

I have had this notion of the social nature of ‘*the habitus*’ for many years. Please note that I use the Latin word...—*habitus*. ...The word translates infinitely better than ‘*habitude*’ (habit or custom), the ‘*exis*’, the ‘acquired ability’ and ‘faculty’ of Aristotle (who was a psychologist). ...These ‘habits’ do not just vary with individuals and their imitation; they vary between societies, educations, properties, fashions, prestiges. In them we should see the techniques and work of collective and individual practical reason rather than, in the ordinary way, merely the soul and its repetitive faculties (ibid.: 103).

Crossley emphasizes that in Mauss’s formulation, body techniques simultaneously involve social, as well as corporeal and cognitive elements, and thus are “social facts” predating and outliving specific individuals. Yet, they depend on the biological makeup and *embodied* knowledge, reason, and psychology of the living individuals who perform them. Crossley argues further that although Mauss did not theorize body techniques as “mindful”, individuals exercise considerable agency when employing body techniques, choosing or adjusting them according to the practical circumstances (including interactive circumstances) of the moment. Body techniques have important normative and symbolic significances which affect their use within society, and they depend on embodied knowledge acquired through prior experience. Importantly, from the point of view of this paper, they can be expressions of emotion, and can affect emotion—a confident posture can reflect a confident mood, or it can be a means to bring one about (ibid.: 103-104). The second case, *affecting* a confident posture, would be what Crossley terms a “reflexive body technique” or RBT.

RBTs are “those body techniques whose primary purpose is to work back upon the body so as to modify, maintain or thematize it in some way” (ibid.: 104). The concept includes practices which involve more than one embodied agent, (e.g. hairdressing), or a single body working reflexively, either as one part modifying another (e.g. hands applying makeup to face), or “it might entail total immersion in a stream of activity. When I jog, for example, I launch my whole body into action in an effort to increase my fitness, burn off fat, tone up and so on” (ibid: 105). Like “non-reflexive” body techniques e.g. walking, talking,

etc., RBTs are cultural practices that take considerable effort to learn. Indeed, RBTs may be simply generic body techniques annexed and perhaps adapted by individuals or groups in specific contexts for the express purpose of modifying the body in some way (ibid.). For example, in contemporary societies such as Western Europe, jogging—a form of the generic body technique of running—has become culturally recognizable as a “fitness” practice, i.e. a RBT for the purpose of “losing weight”, “shaping up”, “feeling better”, etc. Culturally competent individuals who see a jogger have an immediate *verstehen* idea of what she is doing and why. Clearly, Crossley’s notion of RBTs is a useful way to conceptualize “fitness practices”: group exercise participation, weight training, swimming laps, etc. are RBTs which bodies engage in to increase their “fitness” as they define it. And it is the argument of this paper that “vibrant physicality” is an integral part of the lived experience of fitness for many.

Now that the phenomenon of “vibrant physicality” and its empirical sites have been theorized, it is important to locate it within the ongoing “body debates” of contemporary sociological theory, which is the aim of the next section.

### **Locating “vibrant physicality” in sociological theory: “Sociology of the body” and “embodied sociology”**

In the preceding section, “vibrant physicality” has been discussed in terms of what it is, i.e. a positive, pleasurable, lived experience of body-doing, and in terms of situations when it is likely to occur, i.e. RBTs aimed at increasing “fitness”. The purpose of this section is to suggest an approach within existing sociological “body” theorizing that can provide a basis for a “vibrant physicality” perspective for understanding the phenomenon sociologically.

As stated in the Introduction, sociological “body” studies is a multi-faceted, complex, and extremely contested field. It can, however, be useful (if not entirely accurate) to group the various perspectives roughly into two basic approaches: 1) “sociology of the body” which sees the body largely as an object transformed through discourses, regimes, and practices and which analyze “*what is done to the body*” by society, and 2) “carnal sociology”—which I will refer to as “embodied sociology”—which addresses the lived experience of bodies by analyzing “*what the body does*” and how it forms the basis for society and social life (Crossley 1995: 45, emphasis in original). The “vibrant physicality” perspective falls squarely within the “embodied” approach, but as the majority of sociological “body” theories

fall into the “sociology of the body” category, a few remarks are in order about why “vibrant physicality” tends to get lost in “sociology of the body”-based empirical studies.

Crossley suggests that “sociology of the body” has come to be dominated by certain “grand theories”: Foucault’s notions of power, resistance and discipline; Bordo and Bartky’s Foucauldian-inspired feminist adaptations; Giddens’s theorizations of relationships of between body and self-identity in high modernity; Elias’s arguments of increasing reflexivity and (bodily) self control in an ongoing “civilizing process”; and Bourdieu’s concepts of market, field and habitus (2006: 6-7). While all are useful in illuminating certain aspects of the socialization of the body, each begins from a particular view of *society* as disciplinary, patriarchal, detraditionalized, civilized, or class divided (ibid), and what “*happens to*” the body is shown to be derived from the type of society in question<sup>7</sup>. Thus, the lived, empirical experience of individuals, where it is considered at all, tends to be seen as derivative of whatever social conditions are seen to apply. When applied empirically to practices like “fitness”, such theoretical perspectives inevitably lead to the privileging of some “lived” experiences over others—generally those associated with domination, resistance, habituation, and strategic cognition—and the richness of lived experience in empirical material disappears in the analysis<sup>8</sup>. Bodily experience becomes decidedly less “in and of the flesh” and

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<sup>7</sup> Shilling makes much the same argument, though he links it to theorists’ prior theoretical orientations: “[The ‘body’s’] analysis has produced an intellectual battleground over which the respective claims of post-structuralism and post modernism, phenomenology, feminism, socio-biology, sociology, and cultural studies have fought” (2007: 9). Thus, “[t]ied to competing agendas and against the huge diversity of body studies, varying aspects of embodiment are foregrounded, allowing others to fade into the background. This has the effect of making the body recede and slide from view, while undergoing a series of metamorphoses that render it unrecognizable from one incarnation to the next” (ibid.: 10).

<sup>8</sup> The conclusions drawn during the interpretation of empirical material can be quite remarkable. This is apparent, for example, in Havaron Collins’s (2002) exploratory study of the “strategies” used by self-identified “feminist” aerobics participants to “downplay” the practice’s gender “oppressive” aspects and “enhance personal empowerment”. The female interviewees were questioned on the themes of “agency and constraint”, “the contradiction of being feminists and enjoying aerobics”, and on what an ideal, counterfactual “feminist, empowering aerobics” might look like. Interviewee responses that contradict Havaron Collins’s academicist feminist critiques are interpreted as active “strategies” to avoid an “oppressiveness” of aerobics that some interviewees do not in fact appear to be aware of during their lived experience of the classes. For example, interviewee replies that they do not “notice” sexist lyrics during classes are interpreted by Havaron Collins as a strategy of “distancing” or actively ignoring rather than simply being evidence that interviewees are caught up in the embodied enjoyment of the ongoing practice. Similarly, interviewee claims that “...[m]ovements that are repetitive are a source of pleasure, at least for me... You have to concentrate, you have to repeat, and far from being remote from the self, I think the self is very focused” and that “... I see aerobics actually as a reclaiming of the body... it’s a way of reclaiming the self and the repetition actually is a means of experiencing a connectedness... the repetition actually is a way of marking success and a rediscovery of the body” are interpreted by Havaron Collins as a strategy of “rejecting the [feminist] critique” that such movements are in fact dehumanizing (ibid.: 98). In order to maintain the construction of aerobics as “oppressive” while simultaneously granting interviewees “agency”, lived experience as interviewees report it is downplayed and they are depicted as engaging in a strategizing they do not appear to do. A “vibrant physicality” perspective would be helpful in allowing the embodied pleasures alluded to in quotes such as these to be thematized and analyzed—something which is difficult to achieve from dominant “feminist” or other “sociology of the body” perspectives such as Havaron Collins’s.

empirical investigations interrogate the lifeworlds of individuals only in terms of the (presumed) effects of the structure in question.

The “embodied” sociological approaches developed as a critique of the perceived Cartesian mind-body and related dualisms (e.g. culture/nature, reason/emotion, structure/agency) which the critics saw as evident in traditional sociology and “sociology of the body” approaches. Theorists in the “embodied” school argue that such dualisms are problematic, both because they present an erroneous depiction of human nature and society *and* pose a major obstacle in the sociological analysis of phenomena centered in embodied experience, such as emotions and pain (Nettleton 2010: 55-56). Theorists such as Grosz (1994), Burkitt (1999), and Shilling (2003)<sup>9</sup> among others have proposed different strategies of bridging mind-body and related gaps to restore to the body its “fleshiness”. Yet, the “phenomenological” approaches proposed by Crossley (1995, 2001, 2006) and Williams & Bendelow (1998) are singularly useful for the development of a “vibrant physicality” perspective because they take embodiment as their point of departure. As Williams & Bendelow put it, what is needed is “a new mode of social theorizing *‘from’* lived bodies” as the “only real hope of putting minds back into bodies, bodies back into society and society back into the body” (1998: 3, emphasis in original). Thus, the “embodied sociology” perspective considers sociological phenomena from the embodied subject’s point of view. How a “vibrant physicality” perspective can be shaped from this approach will be explored in the next chapter.

### **3) Towards a Solution: Sketching a theoretical perspective of “vibrant physicality”**

How can a theoretical perspective for the understanding of “vibrant physicality” in fitness practice be sketched? I propose that it must do four things. First, it must avoid the Cartesian mind/body dualism that privileges the mind and makes the body into an object which loses its feeling and “gets lost” from view. Second, it must deal with embodied “feeling” as experienced in and around fitness practice. Third, it must treat embodiment as an

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<sup>9</sup> Grosz (1994) adapts Lacan’s use of the Möbius strip to represent “the inflection of mind into body and body into mind” and the “passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift” of factors moving from the inside to the outside, and from the outside to the inside of the subject, forming subjectivity. Burkitt (1999) rejects Cartesian mind-body dualism through a concept of a “thinking body” which interacts with other humans and the world through artifacts. Shilling (2003) argues that the writings of sociologists Bourdieu and Elias offer theories of the body in society, i.e. the body as a form of “physical capital”, and “the civilized body”, respectively.

ongoing process rather than a prior “fact”. Finally, it must be located in a sociology which recognizes the importance of feeling in individuals as a primary force in social life. The first three of these problems will be outlined briefly with possible solutions in the following three sections. The fourth problem will be discussed in Chapter 4.

## **Embodying the subject: Merleau-Ponty’s repudiation of mind-body dualism through the “body-subject”**

### **Cartesian dualism as a problem for “vibrant physicality”**

Whether mind-body dualism is *in fact* inherent in classical sociological theory is a matter of ongoing debate (Crossley 2007: 81); however, there is broad consensus that it *has* been influential and problematic in Western philosophy, culture, and science, including the social sciences (Grosz 1994: 5-10). Descartes conceptualized the soul as an immaterial substance governed by a will of its own, quite separate from a mechanistic body which alone was subject to the “natural laws” discoverable by science. This separation or “dualism” has resulted in “the modern forms of elevation of consciousness (a specifically modern version of the notion of soul, introduced by Descartes) above corporality” (ibid.: 7).

In addition to posing philosophical problems, this dualistic approach has rendered the study of phenomena such as emotion and pain, which undeniably have both mental and corporeal components, problematic. Grosz has argued that the problem is most often sidestepped through reductionism, where “either one or the other of the binary terms is ‘really’ its opposite and can be explained by or translated into the terms of its other” (ibid). Thus, body is reduced to a function of mind through rationalism, idealism, or reason and phenomena like emotion tend to be subordinated in importance<sup>10</sup>. Conversely, mind is

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<sup>10</sup> An example is provided by Bourdieu (1978). One of the objectives of his paper is to answer the question: “how do people acquire the ‘taste’ for sport, and for one sport rather than another...?” (ibid.: 820). Bourdieu argues that members of different classes develop a taste for different sporting practices due to “*variations in the perception and appreciation of the immediate or deferred profits* accruing from different sporting practices” embedded in the class habitus (ibid.: 835, emphasis in original). Sports participation becomes a (subconsciously but somehow rationally calculated) means to an end rather than an end in itself, which leaves little room for embodied, in-the-moment, individual feelings. According to Bourdieu, “strictly health-oriented sports like walking or jogging... presuppose a resolute faith in reason and in the deferred and often intangible benefits ... such as protection against aging ... [and] *generally only have meaning by reference to a thoroughly theoretical, abstract knowledge of the effects of an exercise*... [T]hese activities can only be rooted in the ascetic dispositions of upwardly mobile individuals who are prepared to find their satisfaction in effort itself and to accept—such as the whole meaning of their existence—the *deferred satisfactions which will reward their present sacrifice*” (ibid.: 839, emphasis added).

Here, Bourdieu provides a blanket description which does little to explain the rather obvious facts that while many fitness enthusiasts do indeed come from the “lower middle classes”, many do not; and equally, that many within this class participate in no fitness activities at all. Here, I would argue, we can see evidence of what Jenkins has claimed is a problem with Bourdieu’s theory: “an inability to cope with subjectivity” resulting from the fact that, as Bourdieu depicts it, embodied knowledge working in the habitus “turns out to be a form of *collective* unconscious knowledge, about the life chances of

reduced to a function of body through empiricism or materialism, e.g. mind is reduced to brain or central nervous system function, and phenomena such as pain and emotion are separated from their lived meaning in human experience (ibid. 7-8). Clearly, an approach to the study of “vibrant physicality” must start from a conception of the human being as whole, not dualistic, or reduced—a conception provided by Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body-subject.

### Merleau-Ponty’s body-subject

The perceiving mind is an incarnated body. I have tried... to re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and in its world... Perceptual behavior emerges... from relations to a situation and to an environment which are not merely the working of a pure, knowing subject... (Merleau Ponty, in Grosz 1994: 87).

Existential-phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Western philosophy’s “patron saint of the body”, rejects mind-body dualism through his notion of the “body-subject”<sup>11</sup> (Shusterman 2008: 49). He does this by seeking to “rediscover, as anterior to the ideas of

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categories of actors, although it forms the basis of *individual* practices” (1993: 97, emphasis in original). Moreover, not only are joggers cultural dupes in this account, they martyr themselves to the meanings (Bourdieu has) attached to their class positions and practices every time they put on their shoes and jog. The very possibility of “the pleasures of vibrant physicality” playing a role in the ongoing practice of jogging is difficult to place in this account. While Bourdieu does allow that sports such as mountaineering and walking are undertaken for “hedonistic” (intrinsic enjoyment) purposes, according to him a significant part of the enjoyment comes from the social distinction afforded by being able to participate in expensive hedonistic practices out of the reach of others (1978: 839). Thus, “simple” enjoyment in a physical, embodied practice is made to rely in this account on what might be termed a “structural”, symbolic enjoyment, i.e. an enjoyment based on social distinction generated by an awareness that social inferiors are structurally denied the same pleasure *and* awareness that one’s fellows are equally aware of the fact—all of which may be happening unconsciously, embedded in the preconscious dispositions of the class habitus! In the words of Jenkins “there is a theoretical gap in which actors’ strategies are both identified *and* explained by reference to their supposed outcomes. The ‘how?’ question of processual analysis is answered in strictly empirical terms, by reference to a sequence of events. The ‘why?’ question is only ever answered with the benefit of hindsight” (ibid.: 96, emphasis in original).

I am not denying that Bourdieu’s concepts of social capital, field, and habitus can be useful in understanding “fitness” as an industry or as a societal phenomenon (see for example Smith Maguire 2009). I am equally not denying that the concept of habitus can be theoretically useful as a linking mechanism between subjectivity and social structure (it is similar to the role of habit in the ongoing embodiment of Merleau-Ponty’s body-subject, a concept central to this paper) *once the lived experience of subjectivity is taken into account*. Crossley (2004) and Wacquant (1996, 2004) both use the concept of habitus in their excellent studies of the lived experience of cross training and boxing respectively.

However, Bourdieu’s *starting point* is society and its social structures, and it leads him to predict a reality for individuals that may bear little resemblance to the ongoing *intersubjective, lived* reality of *their* daily lives. This, in turn, has implications for the interpretation of the practice or structure itself. For example, for Bourdieu fitness practice is “about” rationalized, abstract and theoretical goals such as aging prevention within a class habitus characterized by an ascetic approach to life. Mind has been reduced to body (habitus) which then behaves like mind, feeling has been reduced to reason, agency has been reduced to structural position, and lived experience has been reduced to the discourses in government health promotion materials. For the group fitness instructors and participants I spoke with in my field study their individual participation in group fitness was “about” having “fun” and “feeling better” that very day during that very practice. The “vibrant physicality” approach sketched in this paper argues that investigation of fitness practices such as jogging and group fitness should begin with the investigation of the phenomenological lived reality of practicing, and *then* the analysis can be widened to the practices’ place in society and social structure.

<sup>11</sup> Though Merleau-Ponty only used the term “body-subject” once in his own writings, other scholars have found it convenient to refer to his concept of body-based subjectivity in this way (Crossley 1995: 61, note 2). Merleau-Ponty’s body is more than an object, but less than a full transcendental subject, hence the choice of some commentators to use a “third term”, the “body-subject” (Crossley 2001: 89).

subject and object, the fact of...subjectivity and the nascent object, that primordial layer at which things come into being” (Merleau-Ponty, in Reynolds 2004: 6). Merleau-Ponty argues that it is at the pre-verbal level of perception that this occurs. There is no separate mind, according to Merleau-Ponty, there is only an active body ontologically embedded in its world. Rather than conceptualizing this body as an “is-in-the-world”, the body is a “being-in-the-world”, its subjectivity defined by its continuous action, action which is always meaningful, even if it is often unconscious. Thus, the concept of the body-subject “allow[s] us to reconceive the problem of embodiment in terms of the body’s capacity to act, rather than in terms of any essential trait” (Reynolds 2004: 4). For Merleau-Ponty, the ongoing process of “embodiment is the existential condition of possibility for culture and self” (Csordas 1994: 12).

Perception is a primary action of the body-subject. It is an opening of the subject to its world, and it occurs in an interaction between the subject and its world, in the ongoing stream of purposeful action of the subject. “[W]e are not spectators in the world, for we are always enmeshed in a lived relationship with it, grounded in the activity of the body” (Burkitt 1999: 73). Thus, perception is not passive, but active in that the subject intends what it perceives in the course of its ongoing activities. What is perceived is meaning rather than an object in an essential sense. Merleau-Ponty illustrates this point with the following example:

For the player in action the football field is not an “object,” that is, the ideal term which can give rise to a multiplicity of perspectival views and remain equivalent under its apparent transformations. It is pervaded with lines of force (the ‘yard lines’; those which demarcate the penalty area) and articulated in sectors (for example, the ‘openings’ between the adversaries) which call for a certain mode of action and which initiate and guide the action as if the player were unaware of it. The field itself is not given to him, but present as the immanent term of his practical intentions; the player becomes one with it and feels the direction of the goal, for example, just as immediately as the vertical and horizontal planes of his own body (Merleau-Ponty, in Reynolds 2004: 14).

In this sense, prior to a Cartesian “I think” there is always an “I can”, a practical orientation to the world which forms the basis of developing conscious awareness and knowledge (Burkitt 1999: 74). “Understanding” is also a function of “I can” rather than “I think” or “I know”—

it is the body that ‘understands’ in the acquisition of a habit. This way of putting it will appear absurd, if understanding is subsuming a sense datum under an idea, and if the body is an object. But the phenomenon of habit is just what prompts us to revise our notion of ‘understand’ and our notion of the body. To understand is to experience harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance—and the body is our anchorage in the world (Merleau-Ponty, in Reynolds 2004: 17-18).

The body-subject is not a transcendental subject in the Kantian sense, but “a grouping of lived-through meanings which moves towards its equilibrium” (Merleau-Ponty, in *ibid.*: 15). This understanding body uses habits—patterns of sedimented experience learned through imitation—to perceive and act appropriately to its goals in the situation (*ibid.*: 17)<sup>12</sup>. Yet habit is not mechanistic, rather “[i]t is knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from the effort” (Merleau-Ponty, in *ibid.*: 17).

According to Merleau-Ponty, the body has two sides, a sentient subject side, and a sensible object side. It is reversible, a seer, hearer, toucher from the inside, and a seen, heard, touched from the outside. “One always perceives from somewhere... and it is one’s visible, tangible presence which provides that somewhere” so it is the act of perception which joins the body with its world (Crossley 1995: 47). The body is reversible from inside to outside and vice versa through the sensible-sentient “flesh of the body”; thus, “the body’s being-in-the-world is at once mediated through physical presence and perceptual meaning” (*ibid.*: 47).

Moreover, each body-subject exists in the “flesh of the world”, the relational intertwining of seer and seen which makes human existence intercorporeal. The dualism of body and culture is also overcome by the process of embodiment as the body-subject learns and enacts cultural practices so that “[t]he perceiving body is... an agent of cultural praxes and conversely, cultural praxes are argued to be the work of an active body-subject” (*ibid.*: 48). Language and thought provide an important illustration. Language for Merleau-Ponty is central to reflective, reflexive and objective thought—one of actions of the body-subject. Yet language is acquired from other body-subjects through praxis—thus, “linguistic communication consists in an intertwining of sensible-sentient bodies (speaker and listener, writer and reader), an intercorporeality” (*ibid.*: 50). The body-subject’s capacity for “mind” or thought is thus fully embodied and constituted through intercorporeal, intersubjective social praxis.

Yet it is important to remember that according to Merleau-Ponty, although embodiment is the very basis of experience, it is not experienced in and of itself (*ibid.*: 48). The eyes see what they are looking for rather than themselves. Moreover,

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<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the body-subject and the role of habit in its ongoing constitution through its activity of “being-in-the-world” is very similar to Bourdieu’s concept of the dialectical relationship between habitus and field. It is commonly believed that Bourdieu was influenced by and built on the work of Merleau-Ponty in the development of his (Bourdieu’s) sociology (Crossley 2001: 91, 189).



[l]ived relations can never be grasped perfectly by consciousness, since the body-subject is not intimately united with consciousness, or entirely present-to-itself. Meaningful behavior is lived through rather than thematized and reflected on, and this ensures that the actions of particular individuals ‘may be meaningful without them being fully or reflectively aware of the meaning that their action creates or embodies’ (Reynolds 2004: 23, including a citation from Crossley).

Emotions, according to Merleau-Ponty, are often “lived through” in the same way. Although he has been criticized for not systematically analyzing emotion, he is clear that emotion gives a “style” or effect to *all* actions, even if it is relatively neutral. Feeling can not be separated from thinking and other doings in the world.

If I try to study love or hate purely from inner observation, I will find very little to describe: a few pangs, a few hearth throbs—in short, trite agitations which do not reveal the essence or love or hate. [...] We must reject the prejudice which makes ‘inner realities’ out of love, hate or anger, leaving them accessible to one single witness: the person who feels them. Anger, shame, hate and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another’s consciousness: they are *types of behaviour or forms of conduct which are visible from the outside*. They exist on this face or in those gestures, not hidden behind them. Psychology did not begin to develop until the day it gave up the distinction between body and mind... (Merleau-Ponty, cited in Crossley 1995: 52, emphasis added by Crossley).

Thus, emotions are always manifested in behaviour and arise within the context of “being-in-the-world”. They show themselves differently in various individuals, cultures, and situations because they are experienced differently, not simply because they are expressed differently. “We do not have different ways of expressing anger or love. We have different ways of being angry and in love... [because] we have different ways of taking up a relation to our environment” (ibid.: 53). Individuals may be so focused on the situation that they are unaware of emotional states which are quite apparent from the outside and which motivate their action whether they, themselves are aware of it at the time or not. Thus “embodied social agency [is] affective agency and... affect [is] as a key constituent of the social formation” (ibid.).

### *The body-subject and “vibrant physicality”*

In the preceding section it has been argued that mind-body dualism can be avoided through Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the body-subject, a body whose subjectivity is rooted in its prelinguistic, intentional interaction with its world. This body-subject shows its agency through its actions, many of which are precognitive. And its agency is always flavoured by emotional affect. Thus, there is no mind separate from body, feelings separate from thought, or individual separate from culture. There is only a body that is continuously feeling-while-

acting in the “flesh of the world” with others. Many of its feelings and acts are not consciously thematized; they are simply done.

The concept of the body-subject is useful for understanding “vibrant physicality”, a phenomenon of enjoying-being-one’s-body-doing, because “vibrant physicality” is experienced as a mind/body state. Moreover, it is a state which can be called on or prepared for through fitness practices, but is not necessarily under conscious control or within conscious awareness. The role of fitness practice in summoning “vibrant physicality” might be seen as analogous to Merleau-Ponty’s summoning of the less-than-conscious state of sleep:

I lie down in bed, on my left side, with my knees drawn up; I close my eyes and breathe slowly, putting my plans out of my mind. But the power of my will or consciousness stops there... I call up the visitation of sleep by imitating the breathing and posture of the sleeper... There is a moment when sleep ‘comes’, settling on this imitation of itself which I have been offering to it, and I succeed in becoming what I was trying to be (Merleau-Ponty, in Crossley 2004: 54).

While Merleau-Ponty’s theory is useful for locating “vibrant physicality” in the precognitive “lived experience” of the body-subject, he is quite clear that the experience of embodiment is not itself experienced, but is the basis for experience of the world. Yet, for many “vibrant physicality” *is* sometimes thematized in consciousness, either during fitness practice itself or (more often) before or afterwards. In the next section, Leder’s notion of dys-appearance and Shusterman’s theory of pragmatic somaesthetics will be used to explore how “vibrant physicality” can be more (or less) thematized in consciousness in and around fitness practices.

### **Experiencing “vibrant physicality”: Leder’s “dys-appearance” and Shusterman’s “reappearance” in body-conscious practices**

If one accepts Merleau-Ponty’s argument as it has been outlined above—that human subjectivity is a body-subjectivity arising out of ongoing, embodied “being-in-the-world”—then why does the Cartesian image of “an immaterial mind trapped inside an alien body” resonate so strongly with our lived experience (Leder 1990: 3)? Leder argues that it is “*the body’s own tendency toward self-concealment*” that encourages a perception of mind-body dualism in everyday life (ibid.: 69, emphasis in original). When the body functions normally, Leder argues, it tends to be either ecstatic, projecting itself outwards towards its activities in the world, or recessive, performing autonomic functions beneath awareness, or it simply ‘moves off to the side’ as unused parts are forgotten about (ibid.). However, when the body

does come into conscious awareness, it usually does so through pain, illness, or disability, thus presenting itself as a “problematic or disharmonious thing” (ibid. 70). The body’s malfunctioning disrupts the individual’s life-in-the-world as it has been and it becomes a focused-on reason why the individual “can’t” rather than the basis for the body-subject’s primary orientation, “I can” (ibid.: 81).

Leder terms this phenomenon “dys-appearance” where “the body appears as the thematic focus, but precisely as in a dys state—dys from the Greek prefix signifying ‘bad,’ ‘hard,’ or ‘ill,’ and is found in English words such as ‘dysfunctional’” (ibid: 84). In a state of dys-appearance, the primary link of intentionality between body and world and the unity of perceived objects within “the flesh of the world” as theorized by Merleau-Ponty are broken as the body comes “away, apart, asunder *from itself*” (ibid.: 87, emphasis in original). Dys-appearance is characterized by two processes: “intentional disruption” where the connection with the world through purposeful action is blocked by the body’s dysfunction, and “spatiotemporal restriction” where attention is focused narrowly, drawn to the right-here, right-now bodily experience of helplessness or pain. In addition to lived physical malfunctions, dys-appearance can result from inappropriate thematizing of the body, as in social situations where “the incorporated gaze of the Other” makes a person look on his body as an object with meanings attached that do not reflect his lived experience (ibid: 92-99). Extreme affective states such as rage, grief, or heightened anxiety also result in the body’s dys-appearance (ibid.: 84).

Although “vibrant physicality” is pleasurable and therefore not covered by Leder’s concept of dys-appearance, the concept can still be helpful in understanding it, because it opens up the question of how the body is thematized during pleasurable states. Leder argues that sensations of pleasure and well-being do “call one back to one’s body” but that intentionality is not disrupted. “[P]leasure and the happiness with which it is often accompanied is naturally ‘expansive’. We fill our bodies with what they lack, open up to the stream of the world” (ibid.: 75). Thus the pleasurable sensations and affect of “vibrant physicality” can be enjoyed during the course of fitness practice without being specifically thematized, but at the same time, are experienced through a oneness with practice which motivates further participation.

Moreover, Leder points out, “[t]here are admittedly certain pains, such as that of the athlete pressing against limits, that are congruent with life projects and have a positive

significance” (ibid.: 77). In such cases pain causes no disruption in intentionality, and spatiotemporal restriction can be experienced as pleasurable if the individual “enjoy[s] taking themselves to their limit, crossing the ‘pain barrier’” (Crossley 2004: 55). Such states are often actively sought in the context of fitness activities, “welcomed and controlled by the agent” (ibid.), so that rather than feeling alienated from oneself, a vibrant physicality may be experienced—a feeling of being at one with one’s body and alive.

Finally, Leder points out that cultural practices which focus on bodily sensations and states in a positive way can counteract the alienating of the body resulting from dys-appearance. Zazen breath meditation, yogic use of physical postures, and dance and martial arts practices involve a “systematic enhancement of body experience” and allow the body to “reappear” in conscious awareness in positive and pleasurable ways (Leder 1990: 153).

Shusterman’s concept of pragmatic somaesthetics is a useful complement to Leder’s dys-appearance because it is part of a larger project involving “the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (or soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self fashioning” (2008: 1). Rather than individual experiences of dys-appearance, Shusterman argues that it is the type of body awareness promoted by contemporary Western culture which objectifies the body and causes alienation. Individuals are encouraged to see the body as an object when they are faced with impossible norms for appearance designed to serve corporate interests by increasing consumption. Somaesthetics is a philosophy which argues for a body consciousness based on “our actual bodily feelings, pleasures, and capacities” and for improving these capacities, especially for pleasure, through “more perceptive self-awareness of our somatic experience” (ibid.: 6). Thus, in some sense it is a recipe for achieving “vibrant physicality”.

Pragmatic somaesthetics are similar to Crossley’s RBTs as explained in Chapter Two, in that they are “pragmatic methods... designed to improve our experience and use of our bodies” (ibid.: 24). Pragmatic somaesthetics can be seen as techniques to improve our ongoing experience of embodiment. Shusterman classifies pragmatic somaesthetic practices into the “atomistic” (focused on an individual bodypart or surface), and the “holistic” (focused on improving the body as a whole). He further classifies them into “self-directed” (focused on pleasing the self), and “other directed” (focused on pleasing others). Finally, he classifies them into “representational” (focused on improving the body’s surface appearance), and “experiential” (focused on making the body ‘feel better’ both in the sense of feeling good,

and in the sense of heightening perception of itself and its environment). Shusterman emphasizes that these categorizations should be seen as ends of continua, rather than absolute categories. He introduces a final category “performative” somaesthetics (focused on increasing bodily strength, skill or health) (ibid.: 24-28).

Individuals engaging in practices nearer the holistic, self-directed, and experiential ends of the continua would be more likely to experience “vibrant physicality” than those at the atomistic, other-directed, representational ends. However, it is important to remember that the same practice, for example “bodybuilding”, can belong to different categories depending on the specific goals of the individuals involved, or can belong to more than one category simultaneously or consecutively for the same individual. For example, someone might begin Pilates<sup>13</sup> training to slim her waist for beach bikini-wearing, thus putting her practice towards the “atomistic”, “other-directed”, “representational” ends, but then discover that Pilates makes her “feel great” and continue on that basis. Thus her Pilates practice would move towards holistic, self-directed, and experiential pragmatic somaesthetics. For the purposes of this paper, she would also have become motivated by the “vibrant physicality” she experienced as a result of the practice. As would a bodybuilder who began to improve his appearance, but continued for “the pump”.

This can happen, Shusterman explains, because in order to learn and perform the techniques of pragmatic somaesthetic practices such as Pilates and bodybuilding, experiential “clues” (such as muscle fatigue, body alignment, degree of extension, etc.) must be highlighted in awareness and read (ibid.). This highlighting can serve to thematize the body in conscious awareness while simultaneously leading to a feeling of “vibrant physicality”. Thus, Shusterman argues, through “lived somatic reflection” and the purposeful conscious acquisition of bodily habits, Leder’s disappearing body can be made to re-appear in conscious awareness in a pleasurable way, making the conscious pursuit of “vibrant physicality” possible.

This “vibrant physicality” is achieved and experienced within the ongoing process of fitness practice, and it is the importance of process to a “vibrant physicality” perspective that the next section turns.

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<sup>13</sup>Originally developed by Joseph Pilates, this exercise method combines the mental focus and breath control of yoga with the athleticism of gymnastics and other sports for the coordination of mind, body, and spirit. It was founded on six principles (CCCPFB), centering, concentration, control, precision, flow, and breath (Caldwell et al. 2009). The method includes over 500 exercises, either done on a mat on the floor or on specially designed pieces of apparatus (Muscolino & Cipriani 2004).

## “Body” and “embodiment”: Object and process and the “vibrant physicality” perspective

As Shusterman makes clear, pragmatic somaesthetic practices like fitness are learned and practiced over time to improve one’s ongoing experience of one’s body. “Vibrant physicality” is experienced during practice and as a result of practice. Vibrant physicality often increases over a period of time as the body adapts to the demands of fitness practice, and decreases if the practitioner stops practicing. This points to the fact that fitness practice and resulting “vibrant physicality” are intertwined with the ongoing process of embodiment. As has been shown above, embodiment as process is central to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the body-subject as habits are acquired during ongoing “being-in-the-world”. However, Csordas’s adaptation of Barthes’s models of “work” and “Text” to “body” and “embodiment” is useful for emphasizing the point.

In the field of literary theory, Barthes argues for a distinction between the “work” and the “Text”. The “work” is an object, “a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example)”, whereas the “Text” is a “methodological field”, “a process of demonstration” which is “*experienced only in an activity of production*” (Barthes 2001: 1471, emphasis in original). The possibility of meanings and associations exist in the reader but only emerge through the reading of the work. Thus, the Text is lived as the work is read. The Text “is experienced as activity and production” (Csordas 1994: 12); it is intertwined with and inseparable from the process (the practice) of reading.

Csordas argues that a similar distinction can be made between “the body” and “embodiment” where “‘the body’ [is] a biological material entity, and ‘embodiment’ [is] an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world” (ibid.). The body is something we have; embodiment is the process of being, which is really an ongoing process of becoming. “Vibrant physicality” is not “in” the static body (the body as object); it is an experience which arises during ongoing practice as the body moves in its world, interacting with it through cultural practices, including practices aimed at increasing fitness. Thus, RBTs or pragmatic somaesthetics which are cultural forms (or “works”) designed to increase fitness, can also be seen as “ongoing methodological fields”, as they are literally embodied during performance. Csordas notion of “embodiment” is useful for a “vibrant physicality” perspective because it shows

how “vibrant physicality” is intertwined with and inseparable from the ongoing “methodological field” which is fitness-practicing, which is intertwined and inseparable from the ongoing “methodological field” of the embodiment of the practitioners.

## **Chapter summary**

In the preceding sections it has been argued that a “vibrant physicality” perspective must avoid mind/body dualism, deal with embodied feeling as experienced in and around fitness practices, and treat embodiment as an ongoing process rather than a prior fact. Merleau-Ponty’s “body-subject”, Leder’s concept of “dys-appearance” and Shusterman’s pragmatic somaesthetics, and Csordas’s notions of “body” and “embodiment” have been proposed as solutions to these problems. In the next chapter, it will be shown how the “vibrant physicality” perspective can be embedded in an existing approach to everyday life sociology, along with some of the wider implications of doing so.

## **4) The “Vibrant physicality” Perspective as a Sociological Approach**

### **A sociological approach to “Vibrant physicality”: revisiting existential sociology, an emotional sociology of the everyday**

To present the whole picture we must begin with the beginning, the foundation and the end of all else: feeling. We begin with what Merleau-Ponty called “brute being” (Douglas 1977: 15).

Existential sociology is defined descriptively as the study of human experience-in-the-world (or existence) in all its forms... [Its] fundamental... method... is direct personal experience... The goal is to construct both practical and theoretical truths about that experience, to understand how we live, how we feel, think, act (Douglas & Johnson 1977: vii).

The purpose of this section is to place the “vibrant physicality” perspective firmly within a *sociological* approach. It will be argued that this can be done by revisiting existential sociology, a form of everyday life sociology developed by Jack Douglas and his students at the University of California at San Diego during the 1970s.

Existential sociology was developed in reaction to structural-functionalism, proposing instead that the study of society should begin with “understanding the individual as a convergence of social, affective, and cognitive potentials when encountering the concrete situations of everyday life” (Kotarba 2002: vii). Thus, the main themes of existentialist

philosophy, “the nature of the individual, the central role of passions and emotion in human life, the nature and responsibilities of human freedom, and the irrational aspects of life” became central concerns of existential sociologists in their research on sociological phenomena (Johnson & Kotarba 2002: 3). Although research on the effects of feeling in social situations has been largely subsumed into the subdiscipline of the sociology of emotions (Kotarba 2002: vii), the original orientation of existential sociology can still be useful in understanding phenomena such as “vibrant physicality” which are so central to social practices such as fitness.

Central to existential sociology is the concept of the existential self, “an individual’s unique experience of being within the context of contemporary social conditions, an experience most notably marked by an incessant sense of becoming and an active participation in social change” (Johnson & Kotarba 2002: 7-8). Perhaps as a result of Merleau-Ponty’s influence on existential sociologists, this self bears a striking resemblance to the “body-subject”. It is first and foremost embodied, since “[b]eing-within-the-world means that feelings and primordial perception precede rationality and symbol use and, in fact, activate them” (ibid.). It is continuously becoming, as “the experience of self is constantly unfolding as the individual adapts to new situations and possibilities for self growth” (ibid.). It is reflexive as “the self is the focal point of all aspects of being: values, creativity, and emotions” (ibid.). As well, the self is “also the arena for the ongoing tension—if not conflict—between the individual and society” (ibid.).

Studies undertaken from an existential sociology approach are often empirical studies of the ongoing construction of selves in interaction with their worlds. They begin with an investigation of some phenomenon of every day life, “with real, breathing, empirical individuals, located in some specific setting” and provide observations, feelings and reflections about how the phenomenon is experienced as it is lived (ibid.: 6). Emotion is considered central in existential sociology, yet existential sociology differs from the symbolic interactionist tradition in that the experience of emotion (and the experience of self) is considered deep and almost hidden within the individual, rather than immediately visible within empirically available social situations (Kotarba 2009: 149). This is because existential sociologists argue along with Merleau-Ponty that there is a “*fusion of thought and feeling*” in which “[p]erceptions, thoughts, and feelings run into, permeate, and pervade each other” (Douglas 1977: 21, emphasis in original). Moreover,



most of our experiences in everyday life are only semiconscious; the consciousness of them emerges as we do them; it does not precede and determine them. And the very act of thinking about them in order to observe them makes them highly conscious, so that the rationalist model of action appears justified (ibid: 21-22).

Finally, existential sociologists argue, feelings are often difficult to pin down because although they are fundamental to all action and experience, they only become highly visible when they “dys-appear”:

As long as our everyday patterns of life remain intact, it is easy to make the rationalist mistake, to see either thoughts or values as the prime movers of the social world; for in these steady-state situations... feelings, thoughts, values, and actions are highly fused. When the steady state is broken, when our individual and social lives are disrupted and transformed, we can see the human feelings in concrete situations dominating thoughts, values and actions. Thoughts, values, and actions remain important, largely as expressions and reflections of the underlying feelings and established patterns of action, but feeling dominates all (ibid.: 32).

Thus, in the normal scheme of things researchers are often presented with “frontwork” or “prefigured justifications” in interviewee accounts of why they do what they do. “Fronts” are often the unconscious result of the retroactive rationalization of unconscious (feeling-based) motivations. Yet they can also be presented deliberately in an effort to hide conflicts between secret desires and social norms, “to allow us to do what we want do because of secret feelings, while appearing to be doing it out of virtuous and rational reasons” (ibid.: 60). Either way, if “fronts” are taken as the only reality, the importance of feelings in motivating individual action can be missed (ibid).

Clearly, existential sociology provides a theoretical sociological framework in which to understand the phenomenon of “vibrant physicality” in fitness practice as discussed in this paper. Yet existential sociology also suggests methods for the collection of empirical material. Douglas’s “creative interviewing”, Johnson’s “emotional fieldwork”, and Ellis’s “introspection or auto-ethnography” (Gubrium & Holstein 1997: 64-71) to name three examples suggest ways “frontwork” can be penetrated and the workings of feeling revealed. In more recent years existential sociology has taken a decidedly postmodern turn (Kotarba 2002), and authors such as Denzin (1997) have explored new approaches to the representation of lived experience in ethnographic research texts. Thus, as well as providing a theoretical framework for understanding “vibrant physicality” sociologically, existential sociology provides methodological resources for capturing and understanding this pre-verbal phenomenon in empirical sites, and representing it in research reports.

## **The “vibrant physicality” perspective and sociology: Strengths and limitations**

The “vibrant physicality” perspective has been sketched to provide a theoretical tool for understanding “vibrant physicality” as an embodied feeling-state which arises during fitness practices and motivates people to participate in them. The search for a “vibrant physicality” perspective began with the “brute being” nature of Merleau-Ponty’s body-subject, an approach which argues that this pre-verbal state of being/feeling/acting provides a basis for individual human subjectivity, intercorporeal intersubjectivity, and the lived experience of embodying fitness practices through practice. Yet—as made clear in the discussion of Leder’s notions of bodily disappearance and dys-appearance, Schusterman’s insistence on the need for purposeful, conscious thematizing of bodily sensation during pragmatic somaesthetics, and the existential sociologists’ demonstration of the “disappearance” of all but the most intense emotions—embodied feeling-states tend to escape conscious awareness even while they are being subjectively lived through and enjoyed. Furthermore, they are never experienced “purely” or “abstractly”; they are always experienced by specific individuals at specific times in specific places doing specific things in specific contexts. In this sense, they are always different. To repeat a quote from Crossley above, “We do not have different ways of expressing anger or love. We have different ways of being angry and in love... [because] we have different ways of taking up a relation to our environment” (1995.: 53).

Thus, the phenomenon of “vibrant physicality” is created and experienced only in and by individual bodies, during bodily practice, and it is often not thematized in consciousness at the time. Yet, the “vibrant physicality” perspective is grounded in an insistence that these individual experiences of practice *matter*, and that individual feelings such as the embodied feeling state of “vibrant physicality” *matter* because they arise in and motivate practice. As Douglas argues passionately, “feelings, named and unnameable, are at the core of our being... [and] are the foundations of all society” (1977: 51). Clearly, a theory which does not recognize this fact will lead to at best a partial understanding of the social practices such as “fitness” in which “vibrant physicality” plays a part. The “vibrant physicality” perspective as sketched is designed to avoid this pitfall.

At the same time, when it comes to understanding practice, the lived, embodied experience from the individual's viewpoint is not the whole story. As stated above, people have different ways of perceiving and taking up a relation *to their environments*. The “grand theories” of the “sociology of the body”—Foucault's notions of power, resistance and discipline; Bordo and Bartky's Foucauldian-inspired feminist adaptations; Giddens's theorizations of relationships of between body and self-identity in high modernity; Elias's arguments of increasing reflexivity and (bodily) self control in an ongoing “civilizing process”; and Bourdieu's concepts of market, field and habitus, etc.—have much to say about the “social facts” which make up individuals' *environments*. This is because their theoretical emphasis is on what different aspects of society do to the body. And as has been argued using Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body-subject, individual subjectivity is built in an ongoing dialectical relationship between individual and world (including social world) all through the process of “being-in-the-world” which is an individual's human life. Thus, while the “vibrant physicality” perspective is useful because it centers analysis on individuals' lived experiences, “grand theories” are also useful to an understanding of “vibrant physicality” because they focus attention on different relationships and structures which make up “the flesh of the world”.

So once researchers have been able to focus on the lived experience of “vibrant physicality” within a specific fitness practice using the “vibrant physicality” perspective, they might use aspects of the “grand theories” to deepen understanding of social factors affecting the phenomenon as it is lived or the practices in which it occurs. Some examples are in order. Researchers might ask for instance how “vibrant physicality” is experienced differently by men and women in the same group fitness class as a result of gender discourses and the Foucauldian panoptic gaze. Alternatively, they might look into how a feeling of “vibrant physicality” is affected and affects the (lived) relation between body and self-identity theorized by Giddens. Or they could investigate how and for whom “vibrant physicality” is experienced as “controlled decontrolling of the emotions” as theorized by Elias and Dunning (Maguire & Mansfield 1998: 131-134)<sup>14</sup>. Crossley (2004) and Wacquant (1995, 2004) have

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<sup>14</sup> Maguire & Manning (1998) explain the enjoyment experienced by the aerobics participants they study in terms of “the controlled decontrolling of emotions”, but neither enjoyment nor lived experience is central to their account despite this being the stated purpose of the paper. This results from their mapping out of the empirical material from participant observation and interviews on a network of discourses they model as “the ‘exercise-body beautiful complex’”. Feelings of enjoyment and empowerment experienced during and after classes cannot be ignored, but they are “explained away” rather than explained by Elias and Dunning's “controlled decontrolling of emotions”. This is an account of aerobics as a relational

used Bourdieu's concept of habitus in their studies of the lived experiences of circuit training and boxing training respectively. Clearly, the "vibrant physicality" perspective provides a useful theoretical starting point for developing a sociological understanding of "vibrant physicality"; however, it can be profitably complemented by other theoretical perspectives to increase understanding of the empirical phenomenon "vibrant physicality" and the practices in which it occurs.

## 5) Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to sketch a theoretical perspective to aid in the understanding of "vibrant physicality" as experienced in and around fitness practices. It has been argued that "vibrant physicality" often arises during fitness practices and is a key motivator for individuals to partake in these practices, but because of the dominant theorizing within the "sociology of the body", as well as the very nature of lived human experience, "vibrant physicality" has been largely ignored in empirical studies.

The perspective proposed has drawn from the "embodied sociology" approach which takes the lived experience of individuals as its point of departure. Merleau-Ponty's view of subjectivity, the "body-subject", was used to overcome mind-body and related dualisms which tend to make mind/body states such as "vibrant physicality" disappear from analytical view. Leder's notion of dys-appearance and Shusterman's conceptions of pragmatic somaesthetics were used to shed light on the disappearance and reappearance of "fleshy" states such as "vibrant physicality" in lived, conscious awareness. Csordas's definition of embodiment as an ongoing process differentiated from the body as a physical object was used to refocus the perspective on the ongoing nature of lived practice. It was then argued that existential sociology offers a way to integrate these ideas into a sociological approach and provides methodological resources for the collection and presentation of empirical material on "felt" phenomena such as "vibrant physicality". Finally, the "vibrant physicality" perspective was considered in terms of its strengths and limitations for the sociological understanding of empirical variants of "vibrant physicality" and the empirical practices in which it occurs. It

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power (Eliasian Insider-Outsider) figuration based on individuals' commitment to and ability to conform to body and value norms of the "exercise-body beautiful complex". Yet, interviewees report that they have feelings of enjoyment and empowerment during the practicing. The "controlled decontrolling of emotions" within an oppressive power structure is used to account for this.

was argued that concepts from “sociology of the body” theories can be useful complements to the “vibrant physicality” perspective.

Clearly, the “vibrant physicality” perspective presented here is a limited, preliminary sketch. Further work would be useful, for example, in examining the question of whether “vibrant physicality” plays a role in practices other than the RBTs or pragmatic somaesthetics of “fitness”. Yet, I would argue that the perspective’s real value lies in its insights on how embodied feeling-states tend to disappear from the conscious awareness of acting subjects (and the awareness of researchers looking at social practice) *despite* the crucial role feelings play. Structural analysis and cognitive approaches alone can not explain why individuals do group exercise classes, jog, or practice yoga—or by extension write bachelor’s theses, rock babies, attend global warming conferences, fight wars, sell shirts, throw parties, grow vegetables, run for political office, or do anything else that individuals do—and it is this very doing which keeps practice and social structure alive. Perhaps this sketch of a “vibrant physicality” perspective points to a wider need for a “vibrant sociology” which revisits the orientation of existential sociology, rooted as it is in the “brute” felt experience of the everyday.

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