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## Embodied Thought of the Month (ETM) – September 2015

John Day

### ***Understanding Feelings of Happiness and Well-being: the Effects and Experiences of Physical Activity***

Attempting to measure well-being has become quite popular recently, with even the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron setting out a happiness 'agenda'. However, most thinking about well-being has focused upon conventional, quantitative studies comprising large scale surveys and statistical analyses. Within the context of sport and physical activity the question which usually frames research is *how might being active contribute to well-being?* Studying how someone feels immediately before, during and after physical activity participation by asking them to rank their experiences on a scale between 1 and 5 is a popular method for assessing subjective well-being (SWB). These surveys offer a reliable, valid and legitimate measure of SWB because the way in which the human brain initiates feelings of well-being is similar, if not the same, between individuals. This is the reductionist perspective of well-being, advocated by a number of scholars in happiness economics and the behavioural sciences.

Regardless of the methods employed, a recurring theme in the research findings of studies on physical activity and well-being, and the data I have collected within my own research, is that participants refer to how being active plays a central role in feeling good about themselves and better about their bodies. The feeling 'good' and 'better' dimensions of well-being are something that quantitative methods of collection and analysis are able to represent by way of comparison between individuals. Although in this type of research, the self and the body, the instruments through which people's well-being is manifested and embodied, are removed from the well-being experience and treated as static. While the body's physiological response to being active and feelings of well-being are similar, and thus comparable between individuals, the lived experience of attaining feelings of well-being through the self and the body are contextual. That is, the *causes* of feelings of human well-being are context-specific and would seem to be evoked by the environments in which the self and body are situated. If the over-arching objective of the well-being research agenda is to make a meaningful offering to the understanding of human well-being and have any real-world implications, a contextual rather than a reduced conceptualisation of well-being is essential.

One way to go about this is to adopt a biographical and longitudinal qualitative approach to understanding physical activity and well-being. For instance, the life history interviews that I have undertaken in my research so far suggest that the feel good effect of being active can be prolonged following physical activity participation via the bodily sensations encountered

as a consequence. One person made reference to how his body felt the day after a weights session at the gym, 'waking up in the mornin and ya ache, that's a good feelin, cos ya know, you know you've worked for that, you've made that happen and that means there's guna be a change or there's growing, there's growth that's guna happen'. The same participant also referred to how weight training made him feel better about himself. When I probed him further about exactly how it made him feel better, he responded, 'I suppose it comes after a couple of weeks when you, you know when you're able to do normal routines, or normal jobs, but beforehand you'd feel a bit, you'd get a bit tired or maybe get a bit out of breath, or you'd find it a bit of a struggle to lift something in a certain way. Whether it be with work or a house chore and then all of sudden it, it seems to become a bit easier and that is a nice physical change cos you know you've done that, you've made it happen'. Being active made a valuable contribution to his well-being because of the way it assisted him in performing physical tasks within his everyday work and household contexts. Thus, such methods provide a more detailed insight into both the peculiar pleasure of experiencing 'good' feelings of bodily pain as a result of physical activity involvement and connecting the functional benefits of being active to people's lives.

The causes and consequences of physical activity engagement upon well-being are influenced by a plethora of social, psychological and physiological contextual factors. Meaning that reductionist representations of well-being are void of human experiences of these factors that give rise to the sought after feelings of well-being. Richard Layard, an expert in the new science of happiness, is supportive of survey methods in bettering our understanding of human happiness because 'every life is complicated, but it is vital to separate out the factors that really count'. I am not convinced whether this is always possible and am more inclined to think that it is the multiple 'complications' of human life which shape the contemporary personal and political quest for enhanced well-being.

### ***Next month – Ian provides some thoughts about gyms and personal training***

#### Notes

1. Richard Layard discusses the science of happiness in his book, *Happiness: Lessons from a new Science* (2011). The quote I use can be found on page 6.