



Experiencing the Meaning of Exercise

by Dr Steven Edwards

Experiencing exercise

What does it mean to exercise? In itself exercise is already meaningful. Exercisers are living the experience, experiencing the energy, realizing in motion their potential, being the beautiful picture that brings such joy to spectators. They also live the inevitable tragedies and pain. How do we find the right words to describe such experiences? One immediate way is through poetry as depicted in the following personal poems describing exercise experiences of swimming, running, paddling and Tai Chi respectively.

THE BEACH

Summer sunned lives
 Voluptuously moving,
 From crystal clear depths
 And rumbling rollers,
 To fresh sea air
 And salty glowing splendour.

SAVAGE FREEDOM

The shine of the light
 Through African grass
 The wind in the face

And swish of the shoes

Running in a pack

At the break of day

In a bursting world.

HEATONVILLE

A farming community where we meet,
 As a band of runners out for a treat,
 Along a rural road where old friends
 greet;
 Then the slap, slap, slap of the wide,
 flat feet
 Of running comrades in rhythmic beat,
 On the tar which warms in the windy
 heat
 Before music, beer and feeling
 complete.

MEMORIES OF A BAY ON SUNNY DAYS

Memories of hearing the fish eagle
 calling
 In wild haunting freedom,

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Memories of teasing a spouse fearing
 Crocodiles becoming a reality,
 Memories of children fishing and catching
 Fish suitable for survival,
 Memories of loving true family laughing
 In ancestral harmony,
 Memories of shoulders aching and paddling
 In pure natural union,
 Memories of feeling and fresh air breathing
 God is love, love is God,
 Memories of whistling to a dog whimpering
 And caring in companionship,
 Memories that remain in the mind
 Of the call of sunny days
 And salty velvet waves

.TAI CHI

Tai Chi,
 Yin Yang,
 Mysterium conjunctionis,
 Anima animus,
 Day and night,
 Dark and light.
 Umbillini and tan tien,
 They come and go
 Those moments in time,
 When one reaches eternity,

Then has to return,
 Because one is human.
 Tan tien and umbillini,
 Fire in the belly,
 Pregnant with meaning,
 Gut feeling and knowing
 The secret of Being,
 With relaxation and faith.

These poems seem to depict special moments in time. But these poems describe various experiences in different contexts. Can we turn such lyrical poetry into an ode? What is the essential meaning of the exercise experience? What is the meaning behind the experience of exercise? How may we best describe experiencing the meaning of exercise? What is the meaning behind these questions? What does it mean to experience anything? What is the meaning of experience, of life itself? What does it mean to live, to breathe? To move? These are ongoing experiential and meaningful exercise and life questions for which there are no final answers. These were the sorts of questions that formed the theme that motivated this paper? To begin our investigation, we need to focus more clearly, to examine more closely our working material of words and their meaning in order to arrive at some working definitions to frame the theme of experiencing the meaning of exercise. We need some stone to sculpt, some clay to begin moulding. Experiencing meaning

Experience (as verb) is something one undergoes or lives through in the present, at this moment as well as in a series of moments and events at various times and places (as noun or as crystallized experience). Meaning is something one gives to experience as in attributions. In other words meaning becomes intentional through experience. Meaning can occur in the form of insights after an experience such as the exercise experience, for example. Intentionality

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gives meaning to experience and is shaped by experience and meaning as is consciousness and being. All experience, meaning, consciousness and being, is in a constant state of change or becoming, which we realise through action and non-action in relation to a wider world.

Exercise initially allows us to become a bodily centred moment in the world. This here and now experience and presence are a precondition for meaning and transcendence. There seems to be need for some form of warm up period before becoming and being this seemingly infinite moment in time and space. This latter experience has been described as 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), 'runners' high' (Morgan 1978) or being 'in the zone' (Hanin 2000). Non-action or what Taoism refers to as wu wei, refers to moments when intention is suspended and we become one with a changed, wider world, which we realize and become realized in other contexts and universes. While this may occur before and during exercise as when time seems to stop, this is a typical experience after the physical activity of exercise. Let us examine some before and after experiences.

THE SINGING BODY: (A DAY BEFORE THE RACE OF 11-8-01)

The feeling of my body

Dissolving into water,

The ecstasy of my body

Evaporating into air;

Lucid dreams

Feeling streams.

WHEN TIME STANDS STILL (2001-02-10)

The cells of my body are bathed in light

Irradiating full feeling Being

Cellular, chemical and electric,

This is what I have worked for and trained for;

Moments when time stands still before a race

The loving time before the cleansing race.

NATURE HEALING (RICHARDS BAY PSYCHODYNAMIC DAYDREAM)

Seawater feeling

Sunshine healing

Active imagination

Free association.

The exercise experience

Thus far our focus has been more subjective and personal than collective and communal.

From an objective perspective, exercise may be defined as a subset of physical activities that are planned and purposeful attempts to improve health and well-being. The quantitative research evidence base for the benefits of exercise interventions in health promotion programmes is internationally established (Morris and Summers 1995, Weinberg and Gould, 1999, Fox 2000, Edwards 2001a). Regular, moderate intensity, exercise interventions involving noncompetitive activity, rhythmic abdominal breathing of 20 to 30 minutes duration in comfortable, predictable contexts as with Tai Chi, Yoga, aerobic exercise and weight training seem particularly meaningful, if the type, intensity and duration of the intervention are tailored to suit the particular exercisers (Berger 1994, 2001). In its focus on suspension of the natural attitude, personal bias and theory in order to go back to the phenomena as revealed in the lived-world, phenomenology reveals itself as an original qualitative methodology ideally suited to explicate the exercise experience. However, there is a lack of qualitative research in exercise psychology

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generally and phenomenological investigation into the experience and meaning of exercise in particular (Stelter 2000, 2001, Edwards 2001b). Therefore the following research investigation ensued.

A questionnaire was carefully thought through to emphasize communality ('please describe the exercise experience', rather than the more personally phrased 'your experience of exercise') and causal associations ('please describe community effects of the exercise experience'), in addition to ensuring confidentiality and requesting basic biographical data. A culturally diverse sample of 43 postgraduate students and staff participated in this study. Participants were chosen on the assumption that as postgraduate students in the social or human movement sciences they would have the ability, knowledge and experience to explore and articulate the exercise experience and its community effects. The sample consisted of 16 men and 27 women with age range from 21 to 54 years. In terms of home language, 24 were English, 9 Zulu, 3 Xhosa, 2 Afrikaans, 1 Hindi, 1 North Sotho, 1 Setswana, 1 Tsonga and 1 Swazi speaking. All participants were involved with social science orientated (N=29) or human movement science (N=14), honours, masters or doctoral degrees at either Edith Cowan University, Bunbury, Western Australia (N=5) or Zululand University, South Africa (N=38) and were participants in one of five community exercise psychology seminars conducted in English by the author at these universities. Participants completed the questionnaire before taking part in one of five focus group discussions with regard to the exercise experience and community effects thereof.

The essential exercise experience was generally experienced in terms of positive feelings. All participants reported some positive experience, twenty-six reported only positive feelings, seventeen reported both negative and positive aspects and none reported purely negative

experiences. Negative experiences were typically initial feelings of unpleasantness, withdrawal, dread, weakness, tiredness, unfit, exhaustion, pain and agony, which however changed to more positive feelings during and after exercise. Other negative experiences included harsh instructors, health promotional pressures, stressful physical self-evaluation, guilt, compulsivity, addiction and inability to enjoy exercise owing to illness or injury. A great variety of positive aspects were reported, essentially describing an holistic, enjoyable, experience of well-being characterized by healthy, bodily feelings with enhanced movement, energy, mood, consciousness, social and spiritual behaviour.

Participants generally noted that community effects of the exercise experience were essentially collectively shared experiences. Social aspects were especially emphasized in terms of promotion of social support, interaction, connection, cohesion and harmony through the shared community experience and context. The Rugby World Cup in South Africa in 1995 was a nation building example cited. Diverse other positive community effects were mentioned. These included improvements in various forms of community health and well-being as well as reduction of violence and illnesses such as AIDS, crime, poverty and racism. Some negative effects were also noted such as exercise addictions, expenses, negative self evaluations and attitudes towards exercise, labelling of women exercising in some communities, communal pressures wielded in the name of health promotion and oppressive physical instructors.

While each of the five focus groups had their own unique themes, the central theme that emerged from all groups was that exercise is typically an enjoyable, meaningful experience with contextually diverse community effects. The differential meaning of exercise and concomitant community effects for different individuals and groups were explored in depth. All groups discussed various positive effects of physical

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activity and the exercise experience on community health and were of the opinion that exercise should be promoted in a balanced and healthy way. This research thus served the purpose of participants generally conscientizing each other in their group discussions of the positive value of exercise on their personal and community health in the sense of phenomenology as intervention (Edwards 2001c). Some participants explicitly recommitted themselves to exercise programmes.

The findings highlight both relatively universal and essential as well as diverse and contextual aspects of the exercise experience and its community effects. This is a finding that has great relevance in terms of theory and practice in both health and exercise psychology, particularly in view of the dominance of North American, Australian and European literature and cultural values, which forms the background for most of the research in the field. The cautiously chosen phrase 'relatively universal,' used above, should not be construed to refer to the above mentioned dominant literature but refer to what may be understood to be rather perennial exercise experiences, facts and values reported in all forms of literature over millennia, which have improved health, regulated various forms of excess, promoted harmonious excellence (Galante 1981, Robinson 2001, Giatsis 2001, Zervas 2001) and again emerged in the present study.

The meaning of the exercise experience.

As conceived by van den Berg (1953), in the philosophical- anthropological and metabletic sense, man is dialogue: an encountering and encountered being in an ever-changing world. By embodying the world around us and interiorising the environment, things become meaningful (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Meaning is created through involvement and action in relation to the world. The creation of meaning is always context specific. Meaning and memories exist in places (Romanishyn 1981). In their ongoing

interrelationships with an already meaningful environment, exercisers continually perceive and create elaborate personal reality by giving further meaning to specific situations and contexts. The qualitative research and therapeutic task of the exercise and sport psychologist is one of unravelling the meaning of different types of exercise for different persons in diverse contexts (Stelter 2000).

There is a dearth of such qualitative research and therapeutic interventions in exercise and sport psychology. Exercise and health professionals need to explore and explicate carefully the meaning of physical activity and exercise in their client populations before, during and after health and exercise investigations and interventions. From a phenomenological perspective, the lived body is mediator and anchor in the world (Merleau-Ponty 1962:144). In dialogue with the world, it is source of pre-reflective intentionality, meaning and goal directed behaviour (Stelter 1998, 2000, 2001). Building on positive past experiences that have been bodily re-experienced as anchors is also an experientially grounded, theoretical basis for such healing methods as Yoga, Tai Chi, remedial breathing, progressive relaxation, systematic desensitization, visualization, imagery, multicultural counselling and various forms of psychotherapy (Galante 1981, Ivey, Ivey and Simek-Morgan 1997, Weinberg and Gould 1999, Acharya 2001).

Stelter (2000, 2001) has pioneered the application of insights from the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Eugene Gendlin (1997) into exercise psychological settings. This has led to the development of a method whereby the psychologist or any other helper assists the exerciser to resonate with his/her bodily experienced 'felt sense' (Gendlin's phrase) of a particular exercise situation. This 'felt sense' may be of a particularly traumatic bodily experience (eg Achilles tendonitis), image (eg physical self concept of being overweight) or situation (choking at match point) requiring to be

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transformed and/or healed. Typically such felt senses are particular phenomena grounded in a particular situation or context which have to be bodily re-experienced in their original imaginary or concrete situatedness in order for change to occur as is the case in trauma counselling. The 'felt sense' is not necessarily a problematic or traumatic phenomenon. The method may also be used to optimise any particular positive experience as a stepping stone or therapeutic moment to bring about desired change, as occurs in any strengths based intervention, such as solution orientated counselling.

Balcam (1986) has employed an Aristotelian, teleological argument to show that physical fitness differs from health in kind, rather than degree. Whereas health goals are an end in themselves, pursuing the extrinsic goals of fitness makes the body a means to some end, e.g. four minute mile, which may constitute some health risk yet also lead to existential discoveries that we were made for just such movements, risks and challenges. Balcam (1986:37) concludes:

"I think that by examining and resonating more with our own experience of health, or embodied well being, and fitness, or the bodily exploration of human possibilities, we will come to a greater appreciation of our beautiful, composite natures."

Exercise also improves appreciation of our natural environment.

BONZAI

Moving, gliding, running through the water

Feeling the sunshine on my face

Colouring the tree at the swimming pool

Violet, indigo, blue and yellow,

Dappled textures of chiaroscuro

SYMBOLS OF THE SEA

Silent-shushing-slushing,

Grating-booming-rolling,

An interfering prelude

To the ecstasy of the sun.

Unsuspected motion,

An early form of forms

That rolls through all forms:

Translucent lizards glide into undulating,

Then flying foam, on windy days,

Before chaotic vertices of scudding pebbles

Demand plastic sandals enclosing gritting toes,

A test of courage on a small island,

Where omnipotent reality

Reprepares the soul for integration,

Chariots of fire in the hearts

Of the singing, waving runners on the sand,

Where father and son too walk hand in hand.

An emotional explosion of triumph

Recreates the inevitable cycle of life,

Yet still capacity for living

In blue timeless motion.

Exercise may also be an experience that restores social and individual homeostasis as every athlete learns sooner or later

THE BEST

The best athletes are humble,

Often beaten by their best.

Experiencing the meaning of exercise

Our findings have highlighted immediate, experiential, perennial, relatively universal and essential as well as diverse and contextual meaning of the exercise experience and its community effects. From a personal and communal perspective, we may conclude that in its exalted form, as celebrated in many great events, since the Ancient Greek Olympiads, as occurred in the 2000 Sydney Olympics and as occurs annually in the South African, ninety kilometre Comrades Marathon, the exercise experience becomes a celebration of the human spirit.

THE FORM OF THE PHENOMENON

In all our experience,

The outstanding impression,

Is of a human spirit,

Emergent, pure and free,

Existential, essential,

Eternal link with all life.

About the Author

Dr Edwards has had a long-term commitment to phenomenological methodology and has published extensively in the area of community-based psychology, indigenous psychology, healing and mental health. He actively contributes to clinical health practice in South Africa.

Areas of research interest include community-based psychology, Indigenous psychology and mental health.

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