

“My Body Can Do Magical Things” The Movement Experiences of a Man Categorized as Obese –A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

From a medical perspective, exercise and physical activity are valuable tools for losing weight, through an increase in energy expenditure. However, beyond this instrumental value, physical activity has meaning for the person experiencing it. Among individuals categorized as obese, that meaning is often problematic. The aim of this paper is to produce essential knowledge about one young man's embodied experiences of practicing martial art. Through a phenomenological analysis of research material concerning the young man's passionate relationship to martial arts, we identify ways in which someone who has a body often regarded negatively, might still derive great pleasure from his movement experiences.

Introduction

Despite substantial efforts to establish effective lifestyle treatment programs, long-term management of “obesity” remains a “major challenge” (Perri et al., 2001, p 722) and the long-term effectiveness of lifestyle treatment has been described as “notoriously poor” (Mauro et al., 2008, p. 173): The dropout rate is high and participants tend to abandon all forms of physical activity once the treatment program has ended (Gaesser 2009; Gill et al., 2012). Disappointing results are typically blamed on the participant, for lacking the will power and motivation necessary to make progress (Campos 2004).

On the other hand, several scholars have described the ways in which being seen as fat commonly draws negative attention from others in various contexts, and how people categorized as obese internalize these negative understandings of their own body (Ball et al 2000, Murray 2005, Puhl & Heuer 2008). Obesity treatment aimed at lifestyle change and losing weight often perpetuate such pejorative images about obesity by assuming excess weight is a problem that has to be “fixed.” There is a tendency among many who endure such stigma to consider themselves too fat to exercise (Ball et al., 2000) and for individuals categorized as obese the challenge is not just to become fit, but to fit in (Wiklund et al., 2010). Carving out exercise spaces that are not fat-phobic is difficult, as Throsby (2013) has documented.

The aim of this article is to tell a *counter-story* (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p 32), about one young man's embodied experiences of practicing martial art. When the first author met Jim during her PhD project, he was in his late twenties, diagnosed as “morbidly obese” and attending a lifestyle

treatment group. But, he was also performing at the highest level in one of the martial arts (Rugseth, 2011). Contrary to the other members of his treatment group, Jim was voluntarily spending approximately 12 – 15 hours a week at a gym and he talked about his sport with great passion. We followed him into the dojo.ⁱ

Jim at the dojo

The dojo was located in the basement of a large building. Training sessions were held in a relatively small room dominated by several large mirrors on one wall and a thick, dark-green mat that covered most of the floor. The room was quiet, even though seven practitioners -- two women and five men -- were warming up, moving slowly around the mat, stretching and bending. They all seemed completely absorbed; no one spoke. Jim was dressed in the sport's standard white uniform, a wide jacket cinched over a pair of loose trousers by his black belt. Barefoot, he walked lightly from the wardrobe to the edge of the taijōⁱⁱ, and paused in front of the master to bow. Then he stepped onto the soft mat and found his place in line with the seven other practitioners.

The session began with the master issuing single-word commands in a soft voice: “hold,” “stay,” “concentrate,” “breathe,” “turn.” His students were silent, breathing deeply and completely focused on moving their bodies correctly. After a while, the group separated into pairs and began combat. Jim's opponent was one of the women. Although he weighed more than twice as much, and towered over her, this disparity in size didn't seem to matter in their combat. She lifted and rolled him in the same way he lifted and rolled her. The match was rhythmic and ritualized as they moved from attack to defense, with frequent pauses. Their interaction involved a complex relationship between eye contact, vigilance and alertness to the opponent's next move and individual muscle power, all unfolding at a common rhythm and speed. While they engaged in combat the master moved around them, issuing short commands in a calm voice: “keep safe,” “stay out of range,” “you have to communicate.” Feet apart, knees slightly bent, Jim was poised to move swiftly while maintaining his balance. His performance appeared simultaneously effortless and extraordinarily demanding. He moved with a distinct lightness, smoothly and gracefully, focused and directed. He was never surprised by his opponent's moves, and gave the impression that he always knew how to respond when she attacked. Despite her best efforts, he was never really outmaneuvered.

Researchers on obesity rarely consider experiences like Jim's. In fact, research on “physical activity” is nearly always quantitative and physiological (Flannery Pearce, 2009; Garip & Yardley 2011), rather than qualitative. Within a dose-response frame, the focus is on the effects of physical activity on body weight and body composition, rather than how it is experienced. Within the broad field of sport sciences, on the other hand, a number of scholars have explored individual experiences with sports and physical activity from a phenomenological perspective (e.g. Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2011; Bailey & Pickard, 2010; Engelsrud, 2010; Hockey & Collinson, 2006; Howe, 2008). The focus of this research has been on the embodied and sensuous dimension of engaging in sports, particularly the process of refining skills. Inspired by this literature and applying a similar theoretical perspective, in this article we will explore Jim's embodied experience of practicing martial arts. In particular, we will discuss how his experience of

participating in martial arts lies outside the purview of the dose-response approach to physical activity and whether and how the approach we are using here can produce knowledge of value to lifestyle treatment programs.

Theoretical Framework

A number of scholars have noted the gap between the medical profession and patients' lived experience and argued that explorations of medical conditions as they are lived are both fruitful and necessary (Baron, 1985; Glenn, 2013; Svenaeus, 2001; Toombs, 2001;). The work presented here is a contribution to this effort.

Although, as noted above, the difficult and negative experiences associated with being fat and physically active are widely recognized and often assumed to be universal, we found that Jim's experiences as a martial arts practitioner who has been diagnosed as obese were quite different. In exploring his experiences in greater depth, our starting point was the work of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 - 1961). He situates the philosophical question "*Who am I?*" within the body, and locates the search for answers in an ongoing dialogue and mutual exchange of meaning between the body and the world (Evans, 2008; Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2005). In contrast to the concept of the body as a purely physiological entity and a mechanism for energy expenditure, he characterizes the subjective body as our intentional opening to the world (Morris, 2008) Being a body enables us to know the world, to understand it and to make what occurs in it meaningful for us. From a phenomenological perspective, body weight cannot be understood as anything in itself, separate from or beyond the meaning-making body. The body's weight forms an integral part of subjective meaning-making, which varies in response to time, place, and situation. A body that might appear heavy when measured in kilograms can be experienced as light – as when dancing.

Merleau-Ponty also argues that bodily self-awareness is primarily pre-reflective and tacit (2005). Given all that goes on in our daily life, the body is not and cannot be our main focus, he explains; we have no need for conscious thought about how to position ourselves or move around. We can do it without thinking about body parts or bodily locomotion: "The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them" (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p 94). Viewed from this perspective, our movements consist of incorporated skills, or embodied habits, that emerge from and in turn influence a pre-reflective bodily knowledge.

Expanding on these ideas of Merleau-Ponty, Drew Leder argues in *The Absent Body* (1990) that the subjective body is a necessary prerequisite for acting and experiencing. The healthy body, he suggests, is rarely experienced as an explicit, thematic object in itself and for oneself; when it is engaged in daily activity it is absent from our explicit attention. He illustrates this with an example from sports: "I may be engaged in a fierce sport, muscles flexed and responsive to the slightest movements of my opponent. Yet it is precisely upon this opponent, this game, that my attention dwells, not on my own embodiment" (p1). Leder characterizes this as a "to-from" structure: In the normal course of events, our awareness is directed *to* the world *from* the body; it is precisely this obliviousness to our body that allows us to engage in projects.

Merleau-Ponty views the body as an un-thematized background for our being in the world, though it can always become the focus of our consciousness. Contrasting the condition in which

the body demands our attention to the ordinary state of disappearance, Leder (1990) refers to the former as *dys-appearance*. In his view, a state of dys-appearance may emerge in response to a bodily change or problem, such as a sudden itch or, more seriously, illness or pain: “such modes are derivative, involving a suspension of the body’s ordinary from-to telos directed away from itself” (p 84). In dys-appearing mode, the seamless unity between body and world is disrupted. Anyone who has unwittingly bitten their tongue while eating, or hit their thumb instead of a nail while hammering is familiar with this experience. In these situations, the body or body part suddenly stands out as an object in itself. This concept could explain the tendency of overweight individuals to report that they often experience their fat body as an “other” -- something different from themselves, an alien troublemaker, a hindrance to doing what they want to do or something blocking their way (Murray, 2005; Author,).

In addition to describing organic dys-appearance in response to a changing or problematic body, Leder (1990) suggests that experiences of bodily dys-appearance can be triggered by the gaze of the other, especially when this gaze is experienced as disapproving or objectifying. As noted above, researchers on obesity frequently encounter this social form of dys-appearance, which can arise in the course of everyday life (Murray, 2005), as well as in settings involving specific movements (Groven, et al., 2011; Knutsen et al., 2011; Puhl & Heuer, 2008; Throsby, 2013; Vartanian & Novak, 2011;).

Groven et al., (2012) assert that the distinction between social and organic dys-appearance is somewhat problematic, asserting that “dys-appearance generally involves both social and bodily dimensions, and ... these dimensions interplay in ways that make them hard, if not impossible, to distinguish” (p. 509). This argument is consistent with Murray’s (2005) description of how cultural “knowingness” of her fat body interferes with the ways in which she is able to live as an obese person. Understanding identity as “always already corporeal” (p 276), she finds herself internalizing ways of knowing her own obese body that resemble what others perceive when they look at her. Despite her strenuous efforts to overcome the devaluing gaze of others, she knows that it is structuring her self-awareness into a “hyper-awareness” (p. 273) of being fat: “It strikes me that my fatness emerges as a barrier between my self and my body, between my self and others, rather than being the ‘very horizon’ that brings me into being” (p 273). Her knowledge of how her fat body is understood makes her want to remove herself from it, rather than “take her body up and live it” (p 275).

Although the dys-appearing, problematic body has been discussed in several phenomenological studies (Leder, 1990; Svenaeus, 2001; Toombs, 1993), Zeiler (2010) has noted the lack of research focusing on positive experiences of the body, evoking pleasure and joy. She argues that because a bodily mode of pleasure does not necessarily generate worries or calls for action, researchers may not find it interesting enough to merit their attention. In her view, the model of a strict dichotomy between dis- and dys-appearing reflects this bias. Elaborating on her call for more studies exploring positive responses to bodily modes of being, she introduces a third term, *eu-appearance* (p. 338; “eu” being Greek for good or well) to denote bodily experiences that are pleasurable, easy or good.

According to Zeiler, physical activity may generate situations where eu-appearance takes place, e.g. when someone who is learning a dance suddenly gets it right. Like Leder’s (1990) concept of the dys-appearing body, Zeiler’s concept of eu-appearance denotes reflective attention to the body – but in this case, “the subject may attend to her body, reflectively and pre-reflectively, without this resulting in alienation or discomfort” (p 342) and without experiencing the body and

its functions as other than the self. Rather, “the mind-body-world unity is in harmony” (Zeiler, 2010, p 339).

Methods

The analysis in this article is based on research material produced within a larger PhD studyⁱⁱⁱ conducted by the first author (Rugseth, 2011). The study used a qualitative research approach suggested by Max van Manen’s (1990/2001) human science research practice. In this model, the researcher uses individual hermeneutic interviews and close observations. Van Manen (2001) emphasizes a context-sensitive approach that creates rich and descriptive data. Phenomenological methodology^{iv} cannot be reduced to a general set of strategies or research, he argues. Rather, “[i]t is best to think of the basic method of phenomenology as the taking up of a certain attitude and practicing a certain attentive awareness to the things of the world” (2001, p 459).

The aim of the overall PhD study was to explore how the participants experienced living with excess body weight. For this purpose, the author recruited a total of 16 adults, 11 women and 5 men, who were participating in a lifestyle treatment program at a public hospital in Norway. The participants were diverse in demographic background, education level, occupation, and marital status. They ranged in age from 27 to 70.

The interviews, all of which were conducted by the first author, each lasted about an hour, and took place in various environments -- at the hospital, in participant homes and workplaces, or at a café. All of them were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The conversation typically revolved around topics such as how the participant had experienced being fat through childhood and adolescence, and how he or she experienced weight-loss treatment, family life, work and physical activity. All of the participants were encouraged to elaborate on certain themes and given an opportunity to add nuance and reflect further on the experiences they related.

The close observations were also conducted in a variety of environments. Being present as an observer as the treatment unfolded enabled the researcher to be involved in each participant’s process of incorporating the advice given in the course of the weight-loss program. This involvement provided insights that enhanced the interpretation process (Fangen 2004; Finlay 2006; Markula & Silk 2011). The researcher’s close observations in contexts outside the hospital made it clear that the situated fat body is a dynamic becoming, rather than a fixed entity. For example, observations within the hospital context supported a view of the heavy body as silent and shameful, uncomfortable and controlled. On the other hand, when the researcher interviewed participants in their own home they seemed more relaxed, expressive and rhythmically intertwined with their surroundings (Rugseth, 2011).

In preparing this article, the first and second authors collaborated in an intensive examination of the original research material concerning the young man referred to here as Jim. This effort developed out of the first author’s belief that the framework of the larger study had not permitted a full exploration of Jim’s experiences, which differed from those of the other participants in various ways. Many of the others described physical activity as “boring,” “exhausting,” “painful,” “uninteresting” or “not for me.” Jim’s response was remarkably different. Over the course of his life, exercise had evolved from something he hated during childhood and early adolescence to something he couldn’t live without. Bringing in a second author who was trained in physical education, had a PhD in sport science and was experienced in phenomenological research invigorated an intensive exploration of the material that recounted this shift and Jim’s experiences

as a whole. We describe our subject in two sections. The first one called “Jim at the dojo”, based on the first authors close observation of one of his training sessions, were presented as part of the articles introduction. Following now we present “Jim’s story”, based on data from the interview with Jim. We will then discuss central themes that we have identified in his story using the theoretical framework we have outlined, and present our concluding remarks.

Jim’s story

Jim had struggled with weight issues since early childhood and been “in and out” of weight treatment programs since beginning school. He had been instructed to follow a variety of diets and physical activity regimes; weighed regularly; required to submit food diaries to the school nurse on a weekly basis; and taken regularly to the gym; “It was all about counting calories. I have counted more calories than you can imagine and at some point the counting itself became part of my problem “. Despite all these weight-loss efforts over many years, he continued to gain weight throughout his adolescence; “Looking back, I believe that the focus on my weight problem was the beginning of a vicious circle. It made me actually eat more.”

To Jim, the extraordinary efforts of the people around him to slim him down carried a clear message that something “was wrong” with him: “I got this feeling of not being good enough, that I had to be fixed.” Although he did not initiate his participation in any of these weight-loss programs, he blamed their failure entirely on himself, he was the one who was “out of control.” Over the years, he began to deeply dislike himself and how he looked: “I ended up despising my body; I felt disgusting and was deeply embarrassed about myself and how I looked. I almost never went out of the house”. His self-loathing reached a point where he avoided looking at himself in mirrors and refused to be photographed. Reaching 170 kilos he was almost unable to move around, he experienced his whole body as “in pain” and was afraid of dying because his heart pumped really hard whenever he tried to take a short walk. He preferred not to move.

Jim particularly hated physical education (PE) at school. Looking back, he recalled it as “a grotesque and terrible practice.” From his perspective it was an environment where he was exposed as fat in a way that “made me feel just miserable about myself.” When told to run or jump or kick a ball, he felt uncomfortable, clumsy and out of shape compared to his peers; “I would sweat and breathe heavily for no reason, and always finish last when the group ran. I could not take a shower afterward because I was too ashamed of my appearance”. These ugly memories remained fresh in his mind for several years and discouraged him from engaging in any kind of physical activity on a regular basis during the rest of his adolescence. Then Jim turned twenty, and fell in love. The man Jim fell in love with was a martial arts practitioner. To win his attention, Jim began attending martial arts classes himself; “In the beginning it was just ok, not because of the sport itself, but because he was there. I was still deeply embarrassed about my look so I had to force myself to go there every week, but meeting him made it worth doing”. One day two athletes ranked at the highest level of the sport gave a performance at the gym; “I was completely taken by the grace in their movements and their almost acrobatic performance”. Inspired by the two athletes, he decided to put more efforts into the sport himself and quickly felt more welcome at the dojo^v. The coach (referred to as the master) clearly took an interest in him and his athletic abilities; “He was like “I see you, I see your problems, but don’t worry”, he gave me confidence about my potential in the sport, he believed in me and wanted to help me fulfill my dream about the black belt”. As Jim gradually learned the moves and grips of the sport he was surprised and thrilled by his growing prowess: “I practiced a lot and I really enjoyed it. Watching myself on video, doing different

moves, it was almost impossible to believe that it was actually me doing it, that I was able to bend and stretch like that. I realized that my body could do magical things!” Little by little, he was able to accomplish feats he had never imagined possible with the body he had loathed and repressed for so many years. Gradually, he gained more insight into what he called “the mentality” of the sport:

“The aim of the sport is not to compete with your partner, but to support him or her improving their skills in the sport. I understand it now as more like a role-play, or almost like a dance. At first you practice different techniques individually, then you start practicing your techniques together with a partner, figuring out how to cooperate in a way that makes you sort of “win” four times each. I have discovered these things about the sport, gradually and over quite some time. Another thing is that in the sport you have to bear a lot of weight on your thigh muscles, and my thigh muscles were pretty used to that, so they were already quite fit and became a great resource for me”.

At the time of our interview, Jim had practiced his martial art on and off for 10 years. He had been pretty serious about it for the last five years, and awarded a black belt, the highest level of achievement in the sport. Even though he had a full-time job, he usually trained 10-12 hours a week. Over the years he had felt his tense, heavy and tired self fading away. He explained that martial arts had come to mean far more to him than success in mastering techniques:

The most fantastic thing about martial arts is that they demand lots and lots of concentration. For me, it’s almost like meditation. Because, when I enter the gym, and bow in front of the master, suddenly, all that’s happened during the day, my worries and problems, they’re gone and I’m totally here. Martial arts are all about being here and now, and not allowing anything else to disturb you or disrupt your concentration. For me, it’s relaxing to engage in combat without thinking about anything except the moves and grips and turns.

Discussion

For years, engaging in a variety of physical activities had intensified Jim’s problems and low self-esteem. Until he began practicing martial arts, his embodied movement experiences were clearly afflicted by the characteristics that define dys-appearance (Leder, 1990). He felt his heaviness in explicit ways whenever he was moving, experiencing it as an extra burden he had to carry around. In recent years, however, being physically active through martial arts had become profoundly important to him, a necessary break from his daily life. After hating PE and physical activity in general throughout his adolescence, he now found himself deriving enormous pleasure and comfort from engaging in a sport. He visited the gym almost daily and looked forward to training with intense eagerness and great anticipation. Engaging in this sport had become his number one leisure time priority. Instead of feeling disgust with his own body when he was sweating heavily and breathing loudly while exercising, he was eagerly devoting himself to a demanding physical training regimen and dedicated to improving his already considerable skills in his sport.

In phenomenological terms, participation in martial arts was providing Jim with his first positive movement experiences. This transformation can be viewed as a dramatic illustration of Zeiler's (2010) concept of eu-appearance. Clearly, Jim's experiences in the dojo could not be characterized as dys-appearance. However, they are not experiences of dis-appearance either: Jim's words and demeanor make it clear that these are positive experiences of his moving body. Through his skillful movements, his body appears as agile and light. It becomes a source of profound pleasure for him.

When he was pursuing his explicit goal of performing at a high level in his sport, Jim's body became an un-thematized functional power (Leder, 1990). He experienced being absorbed in the sport, rather than being preoccupied with worries about his weight and appearance. Though this description of his experiences with movement is similar to Leder's notion of dis-appearance, we would argue that in situations like this the body is not forgotten or hidden away in the background. Rather, during martial arts practice, we would suggest that Jim was no longer only experiencing himself as the "obese"; he was realizing himself in new and various ways. Merleau-Ponty (2005) sees self-awareness as part of a continuum from an un-thematic, pre-reflective lived body awareness to a thematic experience of the body as an object. The lived body experiences self-awareness and self-forgetfulness simultaneously. The relief from disturbing thoughts about his obesity that Jim experienced while at the dojo had significant side effects. Paradoxically, while he was most engaged in this strenuous, physically demanding activity, he felt most relaxed.

The experience of being "relaxed-in-action" is related to the ways in which Jim's body weight blended with, supported, and enhanced his movements at the dojo. As we saw in the previous section, Jim's bodyweight was experienced as an obstacle to movement, a major hindrance that he had to struggle with or "overcome." When he was engaged in martial arts, the heaviness of his body was transformed into an asset. As Merleau-Ponty noted (2005), "A movement is learned when the body has understood it; that is, when [the body] has incorporated it into its 'world'; to move one's body is to aim at things through it" (p 160). The weight of Jim's body became meaningful as an integral part of his martial arts skills. This made it possible for him to experience an acting body, an "I can!" (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p 159) Instead of "carrying his weight around," he was using it to complete his moves, ground them and give them direction. While performing as a martial artist, he became an embodied expert, moving with grace, lightness and speed.

Instead of experiencing movement as a struggle with his body, at the dojo Jim found himself experiencing his motions as "magical," and doing things he had never imagined possible for him. Merleau-Ponty asserts that relationships between "my body and my decision are, in movement, magic ones" (2005, p108). From this perspective, the intentional body does not have to be guided toward completing a movement; the body and its movement are integrated from the start. Jim's assiduous cultivation of an alert, skillful and knowing body made his experience of "magic" possible. During combat, he responded instantly to each of his partner's moves, redirecting them and applying their force to his advantage. The moves experienced by Jim as "magic," emerged from pre-reflective bodily knowledge acquired through intensive training over a long period of time.

The shift in Jim's experiences from dys- to eu-appearance must be understood as closely interwoven with the particular kind of physical activity that he engaged in. Or rather, through engagement in this particular activity, Jim experienced movement differently from the way he experienced it while participating in other activities. As he explained, engaging in martial arts had "meditative" qualities for him and put him in a mode of being "totally here." The Greek word *meditation* is often associated with an image of Buddhist monks sitting completely still for hours, dwelling deeply on spiritual matters. In that sense, it connotes "a way of focusing one's mind"

(oxforddictionaries.com). Jim, of course, was not sitting still when he felt “meditative.” He was engaged in combat, moving his body powerfully and energetically. Thus, the form of meditation that he had in mind must be understood as *embodied*.

Zeiler (2010) connects the notion of eu-appearance to something similar to meditation. Drawing on scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir, she asserts that “intense bodily pleasure can result in a heightened awareness of the subject’s here and now at the expense, temporarily, of awareness of far distances, the past and the future” (p 337). Through martial arts, Jim found a way to embodied self-reflection, discovering his capabilities both in that particular sport, and more broadly as a moving human being.

We agree with Zeiler (2010) that eu-appearance may have meditative qualities, and we would further argue that movement experiences characterized by eu-appearance give embodied insights far different from the findings obtained through a monitoring approach to physical activity. Objectification of movement qualities – for example, measuring heart rates and counting calories can, as Jim stated become part of the problem rather than a solution. The monitoring approach is more likely to identify a dys-appearing body, which is experienced as an oppositional force disrupting the body’s mode of being attentive *to* the world *from* the body (Leder, 1990). An over-emphasis on engaging in physical activity *in order to* burn calories might actually create dys-appearance, and possibly heighten already problematic experiences of alienation in movement contexts. Applying a phenomenological approach has enabled us to understand Jim’s case as evidence that in certain contexts physical activity has meditative qualities that serve as a source of self-awareness and positive movement experiences. This was a significant difference from the weight-loss programs that he and many others have participated in. There, far from being an unintended outcome, self-monitoring is actively promoted and encouraged (Burke et al., 2011). Through his immersion in martial arts, Jim discovered a way to move that emerged from his body.

Concluding Comments

Weight loss treatment programs typically use physical activity in instrumental ways, viewing it as a medical tool focused on daily doses. The high dropout rate from such programs, coupled with the failure of most participants to engage in any form of physical activity afterward, indicate the need for extensive exploration of how participants in these programs experience physical activity.

Based on the experiences described in this paper, we may question whether a dose-response framework is an adequate approach for understanding individual engagement in physical activity. We would argue that it ignores the dimensions of meaning always embedded in all human activity. Even those who participate in exercise or a sport to fulfill their daily quota of activity will take something from it that goes beyond calorie burning, an accelerated heart rate, and toned muscles. Bodily movement is the ultimate source of all meaning; it is engendered, contained and mediated by the body. Based on the empirical material analyzed here, we would argue that the sustainability of physical activity must be understood as dependent on experienced meaning. It follows that weight-loss programs that promote physical activity as essential to better health could improve if they looked beyond calorie burning and examined how the participants experience that activity.

At the dojo, body weight was regarded as one of many different bodily conditions for movement, and heaviness enhanced a participant’s ability to be stable and forceful while engaged in combat. Obesity experts tend to look at individuals through the lens of their weight. In the martial arts, opponents are defined by their skills, which are manifested in a continual bodily

dialogue. Our modest suggestion here is that it would be useful for health care providers to view being fat as an embodied way of being, capable and worthy of inhabiting in the way Jim does and to create contexts that assist participants in finding ways to relax and take breaks from the demands of their daily life. Therefore, we suggest that instead of focusing entirely on weight loss, programs for the clinically obese should encourage participants to gain insights into their own bodily potential and offer them opportunities to become something more, not less.

Experiencing magical moments through physical activity can be a pathway to new relationships with one's own body and the world, as well as have a beneficial impact on how being fat is experienced. Creating such moments would be difficult or impossible in contexts where being fat is understood as a risk, a problem or a barrier to movement. Recognizing the potential value that having a heavy body could offer in the right context would stimulate a search for new practices—practices that would replace shame and distress with a profound sense of pleasure and comfort.

ⁱ Japanese term for the floor in a dojo (www.oxforddictionary.com)

ⁱⁱ Japanese term for a room or hall where martial arts are practiced (www.oxforddictionary.com)

ⁱⁱⁱ The study was approved by the (Country) Committee for Medical and Health Research Ethics. It was presented as a monograph in (country language)

^{iv} Both in the sport sciences (Martinkova & Parry, 2011) and the health sciences, the meaning of the term phenomenology in the context of qualitative research is a subject of considerable debate. Some scholars argue that the concept of phenomenology should be restricted to philosophy proper. Others believe that phenomenology can be applied in qualitative research, provided the researchers state whose ontological and epistemological assumptions they are drawing on (in our case, Merleau-Ponty's), because each phenomenological philosopher makes different assumptions (see, e.g. Kerry & Armour, 2000). Our own position is that the similarities among phenomenological philosophers are larger than the differences (Zahavi, 2003) and that the nuances of ontology and epistemology are issues best left to the philosophers (Standal & Engelsrud, 2013).

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