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Physical activity – not simply a matter of moving about!

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Physical activity is inherently political – that is the first sentence and the overall message of this thought-provoking and important book. The author, Joe Piggin, senior lecturer at Loughborough University in the UK, shows in convincing ways how physical activity, despite its association with “health”, is laden with a multitude of other values, including hierarchy, status and power. Anyone interested in or involved in promoting physical activity – and we are many – should read Piggin’s book.

The aim is to explore critically in what ways physical activity, or rather the ideas surrounding the concept, is inherently political, and to shed light onto often taken for granted and undisputed political and policy dimensions of physical activity. Piggin does this in various ways. He offers a theoretical conceptualisation of physical activity to show how it is used as a tool that is being applied to political ideas and policy goals, he provides the reader with several empirical case studies to illustrate the political dimension of advocating for physical activity promotion, and he is critical of global physical activity policies which are arguing for significant change to societies around the world.

The book consists of nine chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion. The total page number is 133, which is a perfect size for a book that I think should be compulsory reading in all departments offering education in physical activity (including Human
movement studies, Exercise science, Sport and health or whatever it may be called).

The main chapters of the book deal with definitions and its implications, discourses and the politics of a) knowledge, b) societal change, c) junk food, and d) risk (or rather risk trivialization). Apart from that, the author also brings up the topic of corporate health promotion. In the second chapter, with the title “Contested definitions, histories and futures of physical activity”, the relevant question is asked: What is physical activity? According to WHO, the definition of physical activity is “any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure” (WHO, 2017, 2018).

There is no doubt that this is a complex political domain since “promoting physical activity requires suggesting (and sometimes dictating) what people do with their time, their money, their bodies and their minds”.

The author argues that this definition is reductionist and exclusionary. Instead, the starting point of the whole book is a challenge to this popular, official definition, since, according to the author, “it gives undue priority to the anatomical/physiological, at the exclusion of the emotional, intellectual and political (p. 7, author’s italics). Piggin argues that other definitions are possible that include aspects as individual lived experience as a core component drawing on ideas of struggle, joy, pain, pleasure and achievement, or which focus on the social and relational dimension. Therefore, he provides the reader with another definition where the idea of human movement is a means by which an array of different goals, political as well as personal, can be achieved.

I think Piggin formulates it in a very clever way when he clarifies: “[…] physical activity is rhetorically and discursively constructed well before any person moves” (p. 9). There is no doubt that this is a complex political domain since “promoting physical activity requires suggesting (and sometimes dictating) what people do with their time, their money, their bodies and their minds” (p. 8, author’s italics). Piggin makes the point that the narrative surrounding physical activity is made up of a deficit discourse, that is – more people should be doing more activity more often. He also makes the reader understand that there is no neutral data when it comes to physical activity.
The chapter that deals with physical activity and the politics of risk, is somewhat different than the rest, in the sense that it does not deal with physical activity per se, but rather a specific sport, namely rugby. The risk associated with playing rugby, especially the risk of getting head injuries from the tackle element, is used as a case to discuss how large organisations such as England Rugby and World rugby have concerns that go beyond facilitating young people to be physically active. Piggin gives an interesting account of a public debate emanating from 2015-2017, over the place of tackling in rugby when played in schools. He claims that the rugby organisations in different ways were doing risk trivialisations, for example by citing non-credible studies about the prevalence of concussions. This experience led to theory building in order to understand how sports governing bodies who often had ‘player welfare’ as a priority, would not make risk information easily publicly accessible.[1] In the book, Piggin offers a “risk trivialization framework” that accounts for connections between corporate motivations and the framing of injury risks.

Apart from Piggins own definition of physical activity in chapter 2, and the framework mentioned above in chapter 8, I would say that the book is mainly informed by post-constructivist ideas, especially Michel Foucault’s thinking and theoretical concepts. However, Piggin is well read and there are numerous references and examples from literature throughout the book. One inspiration that the author comes back to several times is the wonderful article by Zanker and Gard from 2008, “Fatness, fitness and moral universe of sport and physical activity”. Perhaps, if I should not only be giving out stars but also make a wish, it would be that Piggin could have dealt more thoroughly with some consequences and implications, moral and others, of the way physical activity is promoted today.
However, to conclude, Piggin has been thoroughly successful in his endeavour to show that physical activity is not simply “any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure”, it is so much more. *The Politics of Physical Activity* is a book I have been waiting for. It is a most welcome critical analysis of a phenomenon in society that affects us all. And besides, the next time I and my colleagues in social science are getting critique for being ‘political’ from those in the exercise science department, I will say: “Don’t you know that what you are studying, physical activity, is inherently political and there is no neutral data when it comes to physical activity? Read Piggin!”

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