

COVID-19 and the moving body: Examining intertwining discourses around the morality of physical activity

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Abstract

That the COVID-19 pandemic has radically changed the way we live is axiomatic, to the point whereby words such as 'unprecedented' and 'extraordinary' have lost meaning. The ways and means by which one moves their body have acquired new significance in the contexts of the pandemic; actions which were once innocuous became deviant, immoral, and reckless, due to the bodily capacity to carry and spread the virus. This manifested legislatively through non-pharmaceutical interventions, which have operated in lieu of and alongside vaccine drives, imposing significant restrictions on freedom of movement and assembly and drastically reducing the availability of services and public spaces.

This feature will consider the transformations borne of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to how we move and understand our bodies. Looking at the previously established discourses around motivations and participation in physical activity, I will unpick the discursive threads and imperatives which intertwine around and bind the body, creating moral panics and ruptures. Understandings of the transformation of the pandemic are vital; we should also be asking ourselves what there is within this malaise of change which we might wish to tentatively hold on to and explore. This feature will pose some suggestions for consideration and discussion as we move forward, through further unfurling transformations.

Introducing COVID-19 and the moving body

Since the start of this new decade, we have all experienced extraordinary transformations which resonate throughout our identities, routines, and relationships, calling upon our collective and individual resources in new and striking ways. I imagine we all carry with us our own personal moments which punctuate this pandemic. The first times, and the times which we did not know were last times. The memories in which you almost seem like a different person, the person you were before you'd heard of COVID-19. The transformations you were expecting or hoping for running in tandem with those which came. The spread of COVID-19 and the crises that unfurled have cut to the very core of our humanity, creating knotty entanglements of moralities, risks, practicalities, and rights, forcing big and complex questions.

The threat to human life posed by the virus has pushed bodily considerations to the forefront of our global socio-political landscape, whereby our fleshy breathing bodies have been understood as dangerous and consequently in need of increased monitoring and restraint. The resultant legislations restricted the ways people move their bodies, as a means to reduce the risk of endangering oneself and others through our capacity to carry and spread

the virus. This placed the human body at the centre of socio-political discourses, under increased scrutiny, control, and contradictory moral imperatives. We should consider how we have reacted to these different pulls and anxieties and what this means for how we inhabit and move our bodies. This feature discusses how these legislative changes entangle with established and emergent discourses in an attempt to unpick what these transformations might mean for how our bodies are understood, and how we live in them.

I have spent the entirety of the COVID-19 pandemic in London. It would be remiss not to acknowledge the potential effects of my locale on my thinking, especially during a time when our worlds have become so much smaller. This feature is mostly focused on and informed by a UK perspective, and the legislative restrictions referred to are those enacted in England. It is perhaps somewhat city-centric, assuming a dense population and limited open outdoor space. Despite these contextual specificities, I hope that some considerations and disentanglements I will offer a conceptual framework for understanding and moving forward from these strange times.

I will start by speaking to the discursive positioning of the body during this pandemic and understandings of the needs and risks around the moving body and physical activity (PA). Second, I will look to unravel and lay out the changes that have occurred within and around the body and what that might mean for our collective understanding. To finish, I will offer some notes of optimism for the future and ways in which we might look forward.

Positionings of the Body During COVID-19

Whilst the fact that we have lived through a time of great transformations is plainly apparent, expectations regarding the impact of the pandemic on PA are murky. Some evidence has been presented showing an increase of PA during the pandemic. For example, Brand et al.'s (2020) quantitative survey of 99 countries concluded that the likelihood both of active people maintaining and inactive people acquiring physically active practices during lockdown were both high. Most research, however, has shown that there has been a significant decrease in engagement with PA since the onset of COVID-19 (Stockwell et al., 2021). In England specifically, PA among adults had been increasing until March 2020, then decreased significantly whereby 3.4 million more adults were inactive (Sport England, 2020). This must be considered as a public health issue – considering the detriment of physical inactivity to both physical and mental health – and a social justice issue, with marginalised social groups over-represented in this category.

The threat to public health posed by COVID-19 has increased the importance of health maintenance practices as a means to protect public services, with people instructed to physically prepare to battle the virus in the same way as they would prepare for war (O'Connor, 2020). This reinvokes the well-established nationalistic imperative around PA; that is, the need to maintain fitness and health in order to well serve nationalist interests (Scruton, 1992). However, the restrictions of the pandemic looked to reduce both social mixing and time spent in public spaces, meaning that access to places of PA, such as gyms, swimming pools, clubs, and studios, was inhibited or forbidden, significantly reducing exercise opportunities.

The understanding of the moving body as dangerous, alongside the imperative to stay fit and healthy, presents both moral panic and rupture. While some methods of PA were often, but not always, permissible, such as going for a run, walk, or cycle in public spaces, these were also positioned as risky to both the self and others, through the bodily potential to communicate the virus.

In addition to the threat to physical health, the psychological strain has also been considerable. Mental ill-health increased during the pandemic, and those living with symptoms – including increased anxiety and depression – were likely to be less physically active (Marashi et al., 2021). Anxieties are known to create a continuum of self-perpetuation, whereby inactivity is produced through fatigue and lethargy, which exacerbates further negative thoughts, depression, and consequent demotivation (Sport England, 2021a). This cycle can only be strengthened by the reduced opportunities and increased isolation of lockdown, as well as additional specific anxieties around catching and spreading COVID-19.

Emerging Understandings and Moving Forward

Moral imperatives regarding PA are not new. The long-established nationalistic thread has operated alongside the social currency of conforming to violent beauty norms and modification (Azzarito & Hill, 2013). The emergent pandemic discourses have been confusing and confounding, with obligations pulling our bodies in different directions. To stay home, but also to stay active; and which of these would be the best way to stay healthy? Both carry with them a set of risks and are fraught with moral ambiguities.

Although PA in general seems to have decreased during the pandemic, certain activities – namely, moderate intensity leisure activities and active transport (such as walking and cycling) – have increased (Sport England 2021b). Conjecturally, this could be the result of a lack of other leisure activities, combined with a desire to avoid the enclosed crowds of public transport. Motivations towards PA also seem to have shifted, with the most common reason for continued exercise during the pandemic being the mental health benefits (e.g., reducing anxiety and stress relief), meaning that mental ill-health can operate as both an incentive and impediment to PA (Marashi et al., 2021).

Perhaps this speaks to shifts within the crises of the pandemic which we might cautiously look to as positive, or poses further questions around what aspects of the extreme recent transformations we might want to tentatively hold on to or explore. It is reasonable for us to consider how we might best honour the difficulties and tragedies of the COVID-19 era, and ask ourselves what we should learn from them, now that it seems we might be nearing the end of its climax. This should certainly apply to pandemic policy and contingency planning. However, it also has the potential to reach beyond that, to broader considerations of how we live together.

Concluding Thoughts and Hopes

This feature has sought to trace some discursive shifts in how we understand our body and the places, values, and meanings we ascribe to its movement. There are the hints of potentials for a healthier placement of PA within the socio-cultural imagination, shifting away from aesthetics, body modification, and conformation of violent norms, towards the maintenance of physical and mental health and meeting of one's socialisation and transport needs. Whilst these are bound up in complex and conflating forces of morality, duty, and accessibility, there are discernible positive threads which run through. Our bodies have been centred in COVID-19 discourses through being the nexus of moral debates, restrictions, and high risk; however, I would hope that we have seen the beginnings of different bodily understandings. As we cautiously shift forward from this traumatic moment of intense restraint, perhaps we can centre our bodies in a different way. A way which acknowledges the potentials they hold as sites of pleasure and celebration, thus moving them, not to adhere to moral obligation or cultural norms, but in ways that feel good and that serve our physical and emotional needs.

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