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An embodied approach in a cognitive discipline

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Abstract

Academia can be an uncomfortable place to work. Academics are examples of professionals who have multiple stresses and pressures. Being an academic is often a fundamental part of someone's identity. Academia can be a cerebral, critical, competitive and judgmental environment. This chapter draws from a study using creative research methods with academics who self-identified as having an embodied practice.

There are different definitions of embodiment. I use embodiment to mean both a state of being and a process of learning about the self, and so embodied practices are ways of bringing conscious self-awareness to and about the body. The academics reflected on the meanings they attributed to these embodied practices, tensions with their embodied identity, and how they used them to impact on their wellbeing.

An embodied approach in a cognitive discipline

This chapter draws from a study funded by the Society of Research into Higher Education which used a range of creative research methods to explore embodied academic identity. My background before becoming an academic was as an accredited somatic movement therapist and educator (ISMETA 2017) and yoga teacher (BWoY 2010). Although I continued with my own movement practices, I struggled with the tensions between them and everyday academic life. I wanted to find out from other academics who self-identified as having an embodied practice how they reconciled this with their academic work and their identity as an academic, whether they experienced similar tensions, and whether their practice impacted positively on their feelings of wellbeing and if so, how. The study had full ethical approval from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Kent. I took a reflexive and autoethnographic stance throughout as I was conscious of my own investment and story within the research and felt that it was important to be honest and open about the effect this had on the collection and analysis of the data. I have approached this chapter from an embodied and philosophical perspective. I am not a feminist scholar, though I have found that my approach to research and embodiment resonates with much feminist work through its focus on affect, the sensory and the embodied self. The participants reflected on whether their embodied practice impacted on their personal wellbeing and if so, how. I consider different understandings of wellbeing and argue that an embodied practice will impact positively on personal wellbeing, however ability to engage with a practice can be constrained by illness, injury, work practices and the like. In addition, the type of wellbeing the participants felt from their practices is different from the vision of wellbeing that can be 'given' in a corporate sense by an institution.

Embodiment / disembodiment

Currently the academy could be described as a disembodied place. Universities privilege working environments devoid of emotion and physical presence (Bloch 2012). Learning, teaching and research are often disconnected activities that focus on the cerebral rather than the physical, emotional or sensory. Reports of mental health and disability from students and staff are increasing as people fold under the pressures placed upon them (Gill 2010). Could an explicitly embodied perspective shed light on this situation? Embodiment is itself a contested term (Sheets-Johnstone 2015), and whilst the concept is found across many disciplines it does not have a defined meaning. For example, sociologists often use embodiment to describe how people use their bodies to represent themselves at an individual or cultural level (Shilling 2012), and some might argue that we are all embodied because we all obviously *have* bodies, and by extension everything we do is inherently embodied.

Whilst this predominantly constructionist view of embodiment focuses on embodied experiences and emotion work, it tends to ignore the body as physiology (Freund 1990). Phenomenology attempts to rectify this, however it can identify the body as an object (see for example Merleau-Ponty 2002; Young 1980). An alternative understanding sees embodiment as both a state of being and a process of learning about the self (Leigh 2012). Embodiment can be understood as an on-going process of bringing conscious self-awareness to and about the body and can be exemplified by somatic movement education and therapy practices. The idea of bringing conscious self-awareness to and about the body means to become aware of the thoughts, feelings, sensations, images and emotions that are present within us, to reflect on them, and to use this knowledge to inform our actions and choices. By extension, any practice that increases this conscious self-awareness is an embodied practice, such as dancing, running, and martial-arts. In the West, somatic movement practices, therapy and

bodywork approaches have been written about and practiced since the early twentieth century (Todd 1937). These encompass a range of specific practices such as Authentic Movement (Adler 2002), Integrative Bodywork (Hartley 2004), Feldenkrais (1981) and yoga (Iyengar 1966; Pattabhi Jois 1999; Rosen 2002) among others (Johnson 1995).

The term 'bodywork' is also contested. The use in connection with movement therapy implies an element of touch that may include, but is not limited to, massage or physical therapy: "a variety of manipulative therapies" (Juhan 1987: xix). This definition of bodywork is distinct from the sociological use to mean work on the body by way of exercise, tattoos, piercings and the like (Crossley 2006). Bodywork meaning hands-on work on the body would instead include work to affect the body's capacity for and awareness of movement and choice of movement facilitated through touch. Such work operates under the premise that by affecting the nervous system through tactile stimulation and movement it is possible to influence the organisation of the mind and body, and the relationship we have with the environment around us: "movement is the unifying bond between the mind and body, and sensations are the substance of that bond" (Juhan 1987: xxv). Moving the body through different positions, and using it differently, can affect our emotional attitude (Cacioppo et al 1993). Most embodied practices have at their core an implicit or explicit philosophy of acceptance and non-judgement, with the therapeutic approaches understanding that it is only once we accept where we are that we can allow change (Hartley 1989). These philosophies also safeguard the notion that we do not need to be 'whole' or 'healthy' in order to be embodied or increase our sense of embodiment. Being embodied is about being aware of ourselves, not about reaching some kind of bodily perfection and is accessible to anyone regardless of illness or disability. Understood in this sense, embodiment seeks to fully bridge the gap between the Cartesian mind-body dualism and provides a dialogue between

constructionist and physiological understandings of the body. Those who engage in bodywork and embodied practices thus aim to access a greater level of self-awareness. Embodiment is becoming an important idea impacting multiple aspects of academic work across many disciplinary fields (Leigh 2019). This research project explored what happened when academics incorporated these kinds of practices into their lives, and the affect it had on their academic work and their feelings of wellbeing.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a ‘funny’ concept, apart from a lack of consensus over how it is spelt, there are many discourses over what it actually means and who is responsible for it. The UK National Account of Well-being (2012) defines it as a dynamic thing, a sense of vitality that people need to undertake meaningful activities, to help them feel autonomous and as if they can cope. However, as Richard Bailey puts it, “many of these discussions take it for granted that wellbeing equates to mental health” (Bailey 2009: 795). Popular, government and institutional communications and directives in turn seem to conflate mental health with being ‘happy’, or with factors that are personal, and to do with whether life is going well for the individual or not. Griffin (1986) explicitly connects wellbeing with happiness, similar to Aristotle’s idea of it being the fulfilment of human nature (Barrow 1980). Philosophically, wellbeing can be associated with either a hedonistic ‘desire fulfillment’ whereby it is achieved when an individual has sated their desires, or as a more objective theory which judges whether things are good for people or not (Parfit 1984). This latter view is one which sometimes results in lists of factors that indicate wellbeing or quality of life (Nussbaum 2000), and quantitative measures of wellbeing (Sen 1999). However, quality of life should be seen as a dimension of wellbeing rather than be conflated as the same thing (Dodge et al 2012).

The concept of satisfaction fulfillment is interesting, as there is the need to differentiate between types of satisfaction, as not all activities are meaningful, and satisfying all types of pleasure may in turn not contribute to wellbeing (McNamee 1994). This is particularly relevant with respect to the types of activities pursued by my academics. Wellness or wellbeing is not just the absence of illness, but an active and ongoing pursuit of something (Blei 2017). Some individuals living with disability or chronic illness may not experience the absence of illness or pain, however that does not mean that they have no wellbeing (Hedva 2016). Interestingly, whilst regular physical activity has been shown to raise emotional wellbeing as measured quantitatively (Steptoe & Butler 1996) there are concerns that poor physical health impacts negatively on emotional wellbeing and impairs ability to participate, so this association may be spurious. However, it is generally accepted that encouraging active lifestyles helps to establish positive health habits and contributes to wellbeing.

Post-industrial society is damaging to the body and soul (Blei 2017). In the neoliberal drive to control employees, create productive labourers and ideal consumers, wellbeing has become another measurable commodity and tool of governance. Dominant discourses of wellbeing (institutional, governmental, health) articulate neoliberal individualism and responsabilisation for wellbeing. In other words they say that wellbeing is an individual responsibility, putting the emphasis on individual decisions, behavior, and choices and do not take into account structural determinants like wealth or class.

Research has shown that embodied practices can act as a counter-balance to the dominant Cartesian mind/body disconnect, which views the body as a machine or tool in which to carry

the intellect or mind around. Embodied practices could also raise the ‘set-point’ of wellbeing for an individual (Dodge et al 2012), so that they have a better balance between their psychological, social and physical resources and the challenges that they face. As a consequence some embodied practices, or techniques derived from embodied practices (such as mindfulness) have been co-opted by employers and universities to form part of ‘wellbeing’ programmes designed to reduce the structural problems in the sector with overwork, stress and burnout to individual responsibilities around developing resilience and the ability to ‘manage time’ (Gill & Donaghue 2016). These co-opted techniques often “focus on various forms of self-management” (ibid: 97) and do not incorporate the aforementioned philosophies of self-acceptance that characterise embodied practices. Instead, they appear to be utilised in relating wellbeing to the imperative to be a ‘good’ productive neoliberal worker. Practices that increase awareness and the quality of consciousness have been reliably shown to have a significant role in increasing wellbeing (Brown & Ryan 2003). Embodied practices such as yoga, mindfulness, and Authentic Movement, a structured dance form that draws on Jungian principles (Adler 2002), contribute to wellbeing through enhancing this sense of present awareness and a wholeness of mind, body and spirit (Bacon 2015). However, we should be aware of how access to embodied practices can be structured and stratified, accessible only to those with the time and money to pursue them.

Wellbeing is often measured quantitatively, with the imperative to be ‘well’ or ‘happy’ (Ahmed 2010) seen as an outcome. In this research study, where I was looking for embodied answers to research questions, I needed to consider how I might go about collecting different (more embodied) data.

Methods: Embodied and creative research

I decided to use a range of creative and embodied approaches with my participants that resonated with my background of studio and bodywork. I felt that it was important to take a creative approach to this study, as interviews and transcripts of interviews would not capture the richness or sensory experiences of the participants. I wanted my body, and the bodies of my participants to be present within and throughout this research (Ellingson 2006) and use research methods that see the body as a place of inquiry (Snowber 2016). I was interested in how and why an embodied practitioner processes and reflects on issues around their identity, and it did not make sense to send out a survey, a questionnaire, or to sit on chairs and carry out a standard interview.

When I called for participants through email, twitter and word of mouth to take part in the study I asked for academics who had an embodied practice to contact me. I did not specify what I meant by an embodied practice, and instead invited those who self-identified as having one to take part. I did not want my own understanding of what an embodied practice was, and what it meant, to colour the data, although I took an autoethnographic approach, and my own emotions, feelings and thoughts are present throughout. I met with 12 academics working in the UK with a range of seniority, from PhD student to full Professor. They came from a variety of disciplines including sociology, anthropology, education, dance, drama, music, and maths. The practices that they shared with me were also varied, including meditation, martial arts, yoga, dance forms such as Authentic Movement and Contact Improvisation, rock climbing and running. I decided to meet with participants individually, for around 2 hours. Each meeting took place within a studio space, away from office space, and the participants were invited to reflect on their practice with access to a range of high quality arts materials. I used movement as a research tool by asking participants to share their practices with me. The

meetings were filmed, and my data included the video footage, the visual art, mark-makings and collage work produced by and with the participants, and my own reflective journal.

Creative research approaches do not privilege language, and instead focus on the affective, the embodied experience, and the relationships formed with the world. The term covers a huge range of often arts-based approaches (Kara 2015). They move beyond the interview more commonly associated with social science research methods (Borqn & Danaher 2017), and have been described as an enabling methodology (Gauntlett & Holzwarth 2006). They can be used to “disrupt the habitual” and elicit change and empathy (Lapum et al 2011: 102), explore identity (Gauntlett 2007), and promote engagement and empowerment of young people (Lyon 2016). They are associated with activist research, and ways to address power-imbances between researcher and researched by democratising research practice (Kara 2017), although it should be noted that they are not automatically emancipatory (Milne 2012). Responses to my research approach varied, although my call explicitly stated that I would use creative research methods. Some participants asked not to be shown on screen in any dissemination. However, all agreed to meet outside of a conventional office space, and commented positively on the experience of a meeting in a different space to the one that they generally inhabited. Some people felt threatened by the presence of art materials, and chose not to engage with them. Art has a history of being used therapeutically (Cox et al 2010) and as a method of reflexivity (Lahman et al 2010). Artistic representations can be used to increase empathy (Lapum et al 2011). In addition, creative approaches to data collection can increase the haunting, or affective nature of the data that we disseminate to others (Wilson 2018). People who perceive themselves to be ‘good’ at drawing or art may be attracted to using these media (Lyon 2016), however the converse is also true as was seen here. In this study I offered the creative approaches alongside more traditional interview questions, and so

if a participant chose not to engage with the art materials it did not exclude them from the research. It did make me mindful that in future projects I should offer alternative creative approaches that are less intimidating in addition, for example the use of objects as tools for metaphor.

Creative approaches increase the richness of research data (Brown & Leigh 2018), and have perhaps influenced even common interviews becoming more sensitive to affect and the positionality of the researcher (Clegg & Stevenson 2013; Brown & Danaher 2017).

Positionality is the idea that who we are, our personal views, values, history and location in time and space influence how we understand the world. As researchers, our positionality will impact the questions we ask, the ways we choose to gather data, and the ways we analyse and draw meaning from it. No research is objective and value-free, we cannot remove ourselves and our positionality from it (Latour 1999). Qualitative research in particular calls on us to be reflexive (Denzin 2010). Reflexivity is often confused or conflated with reflective practice. Reflective practice requires us to reflect on, or to think about, what is happening either in the moment (Schon 1987), or later. Reflexivity asks us to do this and take a step further in order to choose how we want to act and to change those actions on the basis of our reflections (Bleakley 1999). Being reflexive in an embodied manner asks us to be aware of the information from our body, our senses, our emotions, and to use our kinaesthetic awareness along with our thoughts in order to inform our actions (Leigh & Bailey 2013).

Reflexivity, visual and sensory ethnography (Pink 2007; 2009) and autoethnography are all associated with more creative approaches. Autoethnographers want research to encompass rigour, theory, analysis, emotion, therapy and include personal or social phenomena; they “take a different point of view towards the subject matter of social science” (Ellis et al 2011:

274). I chose to use aspects of autoethnography in this study because I wanted to share in my participants' practice, and give them the opportunity to reflect creatively and make connections between what might be different aspects of their lives. Such approaches are associated with a constellation of theoretical approaches including new material feminists such as Carol Taylor (2017), and posthumanist researchers such as Karen Barad (2007). However, my own theoretical framing, whilst strongly philosophical, mirrors more the therapeutic, person-centred and practical stance of Carl Rogers (1967). Practically, my theoretical and methodological approach is somewhat of a bricolage (Denzin 2010), patchwork or 'Pick'n'Mix' drawing on what works and knits together in order to achieve my goal which in this case is exploring embodied research questions.

It is hard to do justice to the complexity of analysis when it comes to the embodied and creative data. The analysis was approached on different levels, using Maggie MacLure's conception of focusing on those data that 'speak' most and are most exciting (MacLure 2003), fully accepting and embracing my positionality within the project. In practice this meant reading and re-reading transcripts, looking at images and drawings, watching video footage, and immersing myself in the multimodal data and acknowledging the emotional feelings and bodily sensations I experienced before drilling down into the ideas and themes that felt as though they resonated through the different modes of data.

Findings

Wellbeing

In some ways the data were very straightforward when it came to wellbeing. Every participant, regardless whether their embodied practice was yoga, a dance form, martial arts, meditation, climbing or running, and no matter what their relationship to it or the connection

their practice had to their academic work was, stated clearly that their embodied practice contributed to their personal wellbeing. Every participant saw their practice as part of who they were, it formed part of their identity.

“This things (sic) makes me happy, yeah, I like doing that” (Lecturer in Maths, climbing)

“I would always prioritise it” (Professor of Sociology, running)

This resonated with me, in that I would also say that my embodied practice contributes positively to my sense of wellbeing. It is part of my identity and my understanding of who I am in the world. The academics talked of the difference between their experience of personal wellbeing and the more institutionalised version they associated with wellbeing initiatives. I asked them what they thought wellbeing was, and what it meant.

“I think in those corporate terms it just feels like having a bit of a glow, but it feels like... if I think about what wellbeing is. There’s something about being fully me and fully present” (Associate Lecturer in Drama, dance and running)

“It’s like this really funny thing wellbeing. Big corporations roll out wellbeing classes, like having their own therapy treatment or a hand massage but does that give you wellbeing? I don’t know...my understanding is it’s something that you have to do for yourself rather than something that can be done to you... You can’t be given wellbeing” (Lecturer in Education, Yoga)

INT: *“staff wellbeing is important so let’s have a wellbeing day and you rolled your eyes there...”*

RESP: *“I just find all that intensely irritating, it’s like they’ve ticked that box whereas actually all the things we were talking of before are wellbeing... this emphasis on*

employability and outcome measures and results changes the nature of education and it changes the nature of universities... So to have a wellbeing day things like that really irritate me actually because life doesn't you don't have a wellbeing day and then oh yeah we all feel better it doesn't work like that. Having time to feel that you're doing your job properly rather than feeling that you're constantly doing everything badly because you're doing so much, that undermines wellbeing” (Professor of Sociology, running)

These views mirror the argument that wellbeing is not something that can be easily given to staff or students by well-meaning initiatives such as ‘holistic’ massages, pet stroking days or the like. Such initiatives, such as the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s recent Catalyst Funding Call to promote wellbeing in post-graduate research students (HEFCE 2017) equate wellbeing with mental health and often offer solutions designed to enhance mental health robustness, or increase enjoyment of life without acknowledging the structural issues such as overwork or casualisation that are endemic in the academy. Recently I found myself delivering a session to post graduate research students at my university on ‘balancing research, teaching and life’. I was struck by the irony of this, as my co-facilitator and I had been exchanging emails about the session at 11pm and 5am in the previous days, and I arrived for the session itself hot and out of breath having run from nursery drop-off to meeting after meeting to get there. Rather than modelling a work-life balance to these aspiring academics, we were instead embodying the overwork, stress and fatigue that appears to be endemic (Acker & Armenti 2004) along with the expectation that academic work does not stop when the office day ends. We were giving in to the idea of performativity within academia (Pereira 2016).

Such ways of working and practices are not inclusive to those of us who are unable or unwilling to work at this level or pace. Female academics particularly seem to make sacrifices for their work (Currie et al 2000), and fatigue, burnout and ill health seem common (Currie et al 2000; Gore 1999; Kolodny 1998). I have since been asked to contribute to a ‘wellbeing’ week for postgraduates later this year, and I have expressed my concerns that what I have to offer may not be ‘on message’. Whilst I believe that individuals need to find out and explore what wellbeing means to them and how they might find it, I do not agree that wellbeing is consequently the burden of the individual. Rather than applying wellbeing techniques more judiciously, getting better at wellbeing, in order to address the cultural and environmental constructs that cause us to be unbalanced and overworked (Gill & Donaghue 2016) we need to actively fight to change the governing structures and culture of the work (and study) place.

Whilst there is an assumption that an increased sense of wellbeing leads to increased happiness, better mental health and resilience, they are not the same thing. In contrast in this study the participants reflected on what their personal wellbeing meant to them, and what it looked like. One participant drew their idea of wellbeing, and the things that fed into it, such as their embodied practice (see figure 1). The image represents the aspects that contribute to their personal sense of wellbeing, and how they interact with each other. Some aspects are labelled, and some are not. The overall sense of the image is dynamic, with an ebb and flow reminiscent of water which in turn echoes the blue pastels they chose to draw with. This image evolved as the academic talked about their relationship with their wellbeing, with what they wanted and aspired to, for, and from it.

< Figure 1 “Wellbeing” (Senior Lecturer in Anthropology, dance) about here >

Another participant described their experience of what wellbeing meant to them:

“What is wellbeing? Really comfortable with yourself, feeling physically and mentally and emotionally comfortable with yourself and source of pleasure as well I suppose...” (Professor of Sociology, running)

When this participant talked about their embodied practice, I was able to see their physical response and described it.

INT: “I can see your whole face changes when you’re thinking about that and your eyes light up and a huge smile on your face, I guess that’s what it means to you, it was prioritising yourself as well which is quite hard if you’re a parent, particularly a single parent... you tend to be at the bottom of the pile, don’t you?”

This physical response towards something that makes an individual happy can be used when working with trauma (Carroll 2009). Just talking and thinking about such an activity will induce feelings of warmth and happiness, and knowledge of positive triggers can be used to walk away and around traumatic issues. Interestingly, the activities first identified by an individual asked to think of things that make them feel happy, that give them wellbeing, are not always the ones that evoke this identifiable positive body response. A whole body response to embodied practice and the positive aspects of it was something that was echoed by other participants.

“It’s the fact that you are, your mind and your body is present together and it’s the power of yourself, so it’s that kind of conscious awareness that you have, you can tap into the power of your own body and all of the power of your own body” (Lecturer in Education, yoga)

“It is authenticity” (Associate Lecturer in Drama, dance and running)

This participant went on to say

“Moving for me is a way of feeling alive... There is this kind of inertia that settles, I feel like I sit down and I can't move, I'm just really heavy... it feels absolutely essential and I also feel like if on any particular day I don't move in some way then I'm just not awake, I'm not really there” (Associate Lecturer in Drama, dance and running)

Their embodied practice was essential for them to feel alive and present in the world day-to-day. It was both energising and calming. My own response to describing what my wellbeing means to me is similar– in that it is through movement and conscious awareness of movement that I reconnect with my body and my creativity, and am reminded of who I am and who I want to be. Similarly, a martial artist related:

“I know that embodied practice isn't always all about physical health as people often think but there's something to that... it makes you think about and use your body in ways you rarely have call to do when you're teaching or sitting at your desk writing”
(Lecturer in Sports Studies, martial arts)

This feeling of using their body was something that this martial artist expanded on:

“I do think there is something to...knowing what your body can do... that feeling of your own power I think is quite unique to martial arts... I think it's different in that sense that it's tapping into something we treat as different, you know we socially construct fighting as being this really essentialised masculine activity... if there's anything that would keep me doing martial arts... it's probably that”

This participant spoke of how using the body in powerful ways disrupted the normative gender identities we generally inhabit. It confirmed masculinity for men, and gave power and affirmation to women who were not expected to take power and be aggressive in these ways. The idea of wellbeing was more than just the physical body or mental health though. For those whose practice was with others, the social aspect was also important.

“I think basically in terms of health, fitness-wise it’s a good thing to be doing... I think it’s socially good for me, to meet people who are different to me, we spend a lot of our lives in little bubbles, with our very academic friends and middle-classness and all the rest of it” (Lecturer in Sports Science, martial arts)

This social activity was present for some of the participants whose embodied practice was running as well. However, it was not present for all participants. The idea of making meaningful connections with others was a theme for many though. Some then talked about what their embodied practice brought to them in terms of their wellbeing, and how it balanced aspects of their academic work.

“I think I learned more how to take care of myself... I think despite everything, how stressful it can be or how shitty this last term was, I still know how to find pleasure in it all somehow, you know? I know how to go have a conversation with a colleague that’s kind of fun when I need it, stuff like that” (Lecturer in Dance, dance)

“Meditation introduces balance because it offers something different... meditation would provide a balance to whatever you do... it sort of centered, gave you a sense of focus and you didn’t have a sense of rush and immediate urgency... You could also say well it would counterbalance all the intellectual stuff you do anyway” (Professor of History and Religious Studies, meditation)

It is clear that these academics believed that their practices contributed to their positive experiences of wellbeing as a balance or counterweight to the pressures they faced in their work lives. Their practices were overwhelmingly beneficial and necessary to them. They were not engaging in techniques or applying strategies that allowed them to self-manage a crisis of overwork (Gill & Donaghue 2016). These academics (and I) used their embodied practices to increase their sense of who they were, to understand themselves better, and to allow themselves the room to choose what came next (Hartley 2004). A sense of wellbeing resulted from their practices, but was not the driving force behind them. Rather than solely inhabiting the performative university as described by Maria do Mar Pereira which is “profoundly toxic” (Pereira 2016: 104), these academics were seeking to carve out spaces to rest, and to be in the present. However, their embodied practices were not always accessible to them, they had periods where they were constrained.

Constraints

These academics believed that their embodied practices gave them wellbeing even if their practice was not always accessible to them due to illness or other constraints. One academic drew their response to the constraints around their practice and wellbeing– with time being the primary one (see figure 2). In contrast to their earlier representation of wellbeing, this image uses two colours, both blue and a vibrant red weaving around each other in a spiral. Whilst the shapes are still organic, the lines are harder, more static and less dynamic. The spirals are both in consort and opposition to each other. The word ‘time’ is more fluid, surrounded by wistful circles, evoking the wish to have more time to spend on practice and wellbeing.

< Figure 2 “Constraints on wellbeing” (Senior Lecturer in Anthropology, dance) about here >

Some of the participants reflected on the relationship towards their practice when it was constrained or absent. Most participants talked of how their relationship to their practice changed over the years, with it sometimes taking more of a backseat or prominent position within their lives.

“I’m not practicing as much as I’d like to... its contribution is as a kind of prompt and a reminder of what I need to do not to restore but to recalibrate my wellbeing. At the moment I don’t feel like I have wellbeing. I feel like I’m kind of torn... I’m not in my body the way I’d like to be” (Senior Lecturer in Anthropology, dance)

“I think it’s really key, I mean I’m not always very good at returning to it... I’m not always very good at sort of connecting with my body practice when I’m in a very difficult place but I do recognise that it is – and connecting, reconnecting with it won’t always take me out of there – but I still think that it is hugely important to my wellbeing” (Associate Lecturer in Drama, dance and running)

“I so don’t do it at the moment it’s hard to grasp. I guess an embodied practice, when I get around to do it, keeps me healthy and alive and less depressed! What does it mean to me? It’s been my life!” (Professor of Dance, dance)

They spoke yearningly of wanting to have more of a connection to their body and to their practice. If we return to Bloch’s (2012) idea of the academy as a place devoid of emotion, then it makes sense that these academics are voicing the tensions they feel between the desire they have to have an embodied practice integrated into their life and the environment in which they work where it is not given space or support. This was something that resonated strongly with me, having had experience of ill health and work pressures that led to my

practice of yoga and movement reducing from six times a week to a few times a month. Without my practice, I lost a sense of who I was, where I was and what I had to say. My practice is tied to my ability to construct my academic work, although before starting this research project, it was separate to the areas that I was teaching and writing about.

For my participants their practice and the ways in which it impacted on both their identity and attitude to work remained present, however active they were within it. Some of the academics had clear connections between their academic work and their embodied practice.

“My work sprang from the practice” (Professor of History and Religious Studies, meditation)

“There used to not be a separation for me between art and life” (Professor of Dance, dance)

“It’s absolutely connected to my practice as an artist. I think all of my work comes out, all the work I make comes out of that sense of embodiment that I get from moving, and you know the whole thing about being present is about you know a learning a kind of awareness of sensation that I found in my practice... In my teaching I definitely bring it in” (Associate Lecturer in Drama, dance)

For one participant their embodied practice was not only connected to their academic work, but had actually transformed their research and practice.

“It genuinely meant a whole shift in my life... I found a kind of wider community... an interest in the body and movement and playfulness improvisation and people who I just found really interesting... I was much more in the real world rather than the kind of academic world” (Senior Lecturer in Anthropology, dance)

Another said that their practice “*midwifed my PhD*” a phrase that I loved, because it spoke to me of the connection, the labour and work that went into both the practice and the thesis.

However, for other participants their embodied practice, at least initially, was something they kept very separate from their academic work.

“No it’s really antagonistic, one is really indoor and completely not mobile, it’s just in your mind, exploring... it doesn’t seem like I’m balancing both” (Lecturer in Maths, climbing)

One interesting aspect of these two hour meetings was that through the process of reflecting on their embodied practice and sharing it with me, every academic began to see the links between their practice and their academic work. These were either subtle, for example character traits of compassion, patience, or resilience that they valued within their academic work and saw as being learnt or originating from their practice; or clearer links between their approach to teaching, or the ways in which they prepared themselves to write or research.

Initially when I began to analyse the data I thought that the participants would be divided into two groups, those that had a clear connection between their practice and work, and those that did not. However, this was not the case. On some levels, all the participants made these connections for themselves, however disparate they initially thought they were. When given the space, time and the opportunity to reflect on their identity and work and to make sense of their experiences they were able to see how things interconnected.

For all participants there were tensions between an embodied practice and academic work. Given the nature of the current neoliberal university (Gill 2010) this is hardly a surprise. Most often these tensions were between the implicit or explicit ethos of an embodied practice to be non-judgmental, accepting and present, as opposed to the competitive, measures driven academic world.

“I think my perspective is that some people resist really hard, “we’ve got to fight this tooth and nail, mustn’t let the bureaucrats take over and fight the power and fight the discourse” and all the rest of it... in that context, part of the trying to integrate some of the martial arts stuff into what I’m teaching, the embodied moving lessons and stuff I’ve shown you in that book chapter, you know it wouldn’t be entirely accurate to say that it’s got nothing to do with that” (Lecturer in Sports Science, martial arts)

However, the participants remained positive about their relationships with both their embodied practice and their academic work, whether that was the individual, consensual relationship they had with academia, awareness of the role they played in supervising PhD students who wished to combine their embodied practice with their research in Practice-as-Research (Barrett & Bolt 2010; Trimmingham 2002), or in idealised dreams of how they might combine the two in the future.

“Yeah there’s pressure... publications... completing the PhD and stuff like that but because those things are so wrapped up with my artistic work and my passions and stuff and I don’t have a problem with that... I feel like I have a consensual relationship with academia!” (Lecturer in Dance, dance)

“I understand it and I’m supervising people who are putting practice first in their PhD so I really understand what they’re doing and can support that. I guess you’re right, I guess there isn’t that many of us and I know all my artist friends are still very

anti-academia... they don't want to mix the two worlds. The artists are not interested in doing PhDs" (Professor of Dance, dance)

"So ideal world would be I can take all that I know about academic practice and embodied practice and live it as an embodied action" (Senior Lecturer in Anthropology, dance)

Whilst feeling the constraints and pressures of the measured university and overwork (Acker & Armenti 2004; Gill 2010; Pereira 2016) some also felt the impact of ill health and injury as disrupting forces. It seemed that there were elements of justification and rationalisation for these academics as they tried to make sense of the sometimes opposing demands of their practice and work whilst remaining open to the benefits and ideals of both.

Concluding thoughts

My participants (and I) acknowledged that embodied practices fed into their academic work and sense of wellbeing. In some ways they acted as antidotes to the working culture that prevails in the academy (Ball 2003), however they resented that these very same practices might be used against them as part of an institutionalised drive to increase their productivity under the guise of increasing wellbeing (Gill & Donaghue 2016). It is not clear whether the positive levels of wellbeing they reported would have been captured on the quantitative measures of wellbeing often associated with mental health and quality of life, as the participants spoke of more esoteric issues of feeling authentic, feeling present and feeling alive than measures such as whether they ate healthily, whether their mental health was good, and whether they participated in physical exercise (Abdallah et al 2008). Some of the academics were not engaged in any physical activity that contributed towards their wellbeing— their embodied practice was sedentary (ie meditation) or they were not currently

engaged with it due to constraints on time or health. And yet they reported that their wellbeing was good. This suggests to me that there is a deficit in the most commonly accepted model of wellbeing. Wellbeing is not a matter of ‘collecting’ activities or attributes. Instead it demands a level of consciousness and engagement from participants.

In my study I wanted to bring the bodies of my participants into the research (Ellingson 2006). This meant that I set out to use creative and embodied research methods in order to go beyond capturing just their words, and instead to explore the movements, thoughts, feelings, sensations and images they associated with their embodied practice and their academic work. The constraints of academic outputs means that in this chapter I am limited to sharing the words and a few images, however, my research has also resulted in a video essay made in collaboration with a filmmaker (Blackburn 2017) which shows the emotion, affect and haunting nature of the data I captured (Wilson 2018).

My experience has shown that these methods are ideal for capturing these more esoteric ideals and experiences (Brown & Leigh 2018). My participants were not limited by options or preconceived ideas about responses. Instead, they were given the freedom to explore their own responses and reflections, to change their minds, and to express themselves in their own modes— be that by way of movement, emotion, drawing or mark-making. This allowed them to be active in co-producing knowledge, which is vital when participants are also academics and cogniscant of the processes of research. Whilst the multi-modal data were challenging to analyse (MacLure 2003) they give a richness and depth to accounts of individual experiences. With a topic such as this, seeking to explore embodied experiences, creative approaches to research are a natural fit.

I believe that embodied practices are different from other physical activities. What differentiates them from other activities that might be thought to enhance wellbeing? This study suggests that it is the conscious self-awareness that the participants bring to not only their practice, but to other aspects of their lives. There is no over-arching definition of what an embodied practice is, or how one might practise it. It is not dependent on including social activity, though it may do. It is not dependent on moving the physical body excessively in the pursuit of physical fitness, though it may include this. It is not dependent on preventing injury, and it is not the sole preserve of the fit, the healthy, the able-bodied. It is not a guarantee that a practitioner will not suffer from poor mental health– and yet it may well offer an awareness around this and thus lead to enhanced feelings of personal wellbeing and balance. Embodied practices are not the only route to promote wellbeing. For example there is research showing that singing in a choir leads to increased wellbeing (Livesey et al 2012), and this is something I personally experience. However, the wellbeing I get from singing in a choir is transitory, it is to do with enjoyment and pleasure, it is hedonistic wellbeing. The wellbeing I get from my own embodied movement practice, as for the participants in this study, is a sense of awareness about who I am and where I am in relation to the world and others within the world. Wellbeing is a word and concept that is used to mean different things to different people, and even within this chapter it has had a variety of uses. The experiences of my participants from an embodied perspective suggest that there is a case for modifying the concept of ‘wellbeing’ further– or using a different concept altogether– to refer to the embodied phenomena we have described.

As can be seen from my small sample, the practices an individual is drawn to may vary. There was a large range of different practices in my study, and what might be an embodied practice leading to increased self-awareness for one person might not be for another. Running is a perfect example of this— for some people it is a purely physical experience about pounding the road or treadmill, listening to music and losing oneself in the experience. For those who ran in this study, it was about an awareness of self, of breath, of the moving living body and being outside and surrounded by nature. Similarly, yoga can be competitive and injurious, or it can bring about balance and acceptance. It is the intention of the person practising as much as the activity or practice itself that is important. This idea of intention comes back around to Barad's (2007) idea of posthumanism, linked as it is to physics and quantum theory. In order to promote personal wellbeing, I think it is worth returning to the words of the participant who called for less pressure, more time, and more space within the academy. Institutions need to recognise the structural constructs that cause the ill health, burnout and fatigue in the academy. As well as tackling these, they should provide opportunities for staff and students to pursue embodied practices or social activities within the work day. This would allow individuals to pursue and find those practices that resonated most with them, without impinging on their family or out-of-work time and commitments. In this way the institution would promote wellbeing in fact as opposed to paying lip-service to the idea, and in return would have happier, and more productive and fulfilled staff.

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