# Is skillful bodily self-awareness healthy? A phenomenological investigation of how athletes' versus non-athletes handle low back pain.

Low back pain (LBP) is one of most frequent reasons for seeking treatment in the Danish healthcare system (1-2). Athletes are no exception (3-5). Interestingly, this group of LBP patients have experiences and capabilities of their body and movement that might help them finding ways to handle LBP. While researchers have interviewed athletes' ways of relating to LBP (e.g. 27-28), research focusing on how this group might have specialized backgrounds to feel, sense and adjust their movement because of the LBP situation has been given surprisingly little attention. Furthermore, studies engaging ethnographical fieldwork to follow people (athletes as well as non-athletes) in their everyday movement practices of living with LBP is sparce. We know very little about the actual practices of how people with LBP move in their everyday life. *This project (PhD – open call) will contribute important new insights on athletes' and non-athletes' lived experiences of handling LBP by: involving ethnographical fieldwork in the investigation of everyday movement practices.* 

Today we do *not* know how we prevent LBP, and we do *not* have treatment to cure LBP (6). The most promising treatments recommend improvement of self-management and active and healthy lifestyles (7). Developing patients' ways of attending to and being aware of the moving body has recently shown impressively promising results (8). At the same time, we know that sports and dance activities demand athletes to develop their ways of reflectively attending to, being aware of, and skillfully feeling their moving body (e.g. 9-13) or, in other words, to develop a skillful bodily self-awareness. As recommendations exactly emphasize that physical activity and bodily self-awareness are beneficial for persons with LBP: *This project investigates the ways in which bodily self-awareness is of use when athletes and non-athletes face and are to handle LBP – and <i>if or how athletes' skillful bodily self-awareness is beneficial*?. To do so, we will engage qualitative methods and analytical approaches that are specifically developed for analyzing lived experiences. Phenomenology has proved especially valuable for this. Its concepts and distinctions have been used as resources to study experiences of complex health conditions for decades (14-15). The focus and research questions of the project are: Based on a phenomenological account of bodily self-awareness this project investigates how skillful athletes engage their specialized bodily self-awareness when facing LBP – compared to non-athletes facing LBP. The investigation will be structured round the following research questions:

- a. What differences can be identified in how athletes and non-athletes handle LBP?
- b. Which aspects of skillful bodily self-awareness are transferable to LBP situations for athletes and non-athletes respectively?
- c. Which factors influence the way bodily self-awareness come into use for athletes and for non-athletes?

The findings will contribute insights important for understanding how skilled bodily self-awareness can be beneficial when facing LBP and thereby indicate potential 'healthy' ways of engaging bodily self-awareness. In later phases of the project, workshops and seminars will be held with chiropractors, sports chiropractors, coaches/leaders, patients, and athletes to ensure that findings can be used to affect and facilitate development of current approaches to treating athletes' LBP. Thus, as a first and important step we expect the results of this project to affect how health practitioners relate to and involve the patients' history of movement experiences in the treatment. We also expect the results to form the ground for further research developing ways of communicating and setting up plans or strategies for keeping on moving despite LBP in the clinical setting. *This way the project will provide important new ground for impacting the treatment of LBP for athletes and expectably also non-athletes*.

The PI has the unique background to supervise and collaborate with the PhD candidate on this project. Her research has demonstrated how bodily self-awareness can be described and how it is developed in highly specialized ways in elite athletes (e.g.16-20). She is the head of the research unit Movement, Culture and Society (MoCS) which today is at the international frontiers developing the ways phenomenology can be put to use in sports, dance and health research (e.g.21-23). Over the last five years, MoCS has established interdisciplinary research collaboration with the research unit Clinical Biomechanics (KB) (2, 24-25) who is world leading in research on LBP. An advisory board of MoCS and KB researchers at IOB, SDU will be connected to the project – including:

Professor Jan Hartvigsen KB (<u>https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5876-7410</u>)

Professor Alice Kongsted KB (<u>https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5537-6038</u>) Assistant Professor Assistant Professor Anthony V. Fernandez, Danish Institute for Advanced Study (DIAS) and MoCS (<u>https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1376-4520</u>)

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#### State of the art

Athletes and LBP: Reviews and surveys indicate that athletes in certain sports and dance activities have a higher prevalence of LBP compared to non-athletes (4-5, 26-27). Research in athletes' LBP problems has primarily focused on identifying *what* will be the most successful LBP treatment for different kinds of athletes (5). Several studies indicate that elite-competitive culture and highperformance expectations tend to work as negative factors for athletes' ways of handling LBP: Elite athletes tend to not report and to potentially lie about LBP (26, 28). However, handling LBP situations in ways to keep up performing in ways that negatively influence their health does not rule out that the athlete does so based on specialized kinds of bodily self-awareness but rather addresses the urgent need for supporting an openness about LBP problems and for developing knowledge of how treatment can be offered the best way for and in elite/professional athletes (27-28). One study has looked into if athletes might cope differently with the pain and doubts related to LBP compared to non-athletes and indicate minor differences in psychological responses between athletes versus non-athletes with LBP (29). However, like the majorities of research on LBP, this study uses questionnaires. Qualitative descriptions and analysis of lived experiences specifically focusing on everyday practices are highly needed to contribute knowledge of how athletes' as well as nonathletes use bodily self-awareness in their everyday movement practices while handling LBP (30).

**Bodily self-awareness**: Phenomenology has offered important accounts of the ways the physicality of the body can be present to one's awareness in *pre-reflective* and *reflective* ways and not least how these levels of one's awareness work in closely intertwined ways. Conceptual descriptions have focused on tacit versus explicit knowledge – or 'knowing how' and 'knowing that' (31- 32.) and more recently on body schema versus body image (33- 34). In the sport sciences, researchers have engaged these phenomenological descriptions in analyses of how skills are to be considered flexible sensory-motor capabilities (35-36), how learning takes place in physical education (37), and how interaction is shaped pre-reflectively (19, 39). Importantly, analyses of the skillful practices and experiences of different kinds of athletes have contributed phenomenological development of a third dimension of bodily self-awareness in which the physicality of the body is present to one's

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experience without being related to – or objectified (39-41). This dimension addresses *a felt aspect* of bodily self-awareness (42). The PI has indicated how this 'felt' dimension of bodily self-awareness is fundamental, in different ways and on different conditions, to athletes' specialized ways of exploring and developing their competences and techniques (16-20). However, despite often praised (when for example addressing the value of incorporating and developing skills in sport and dance), we still do not know in which ways the athletes' specialized bodily self-awareness is transferable and can be of use beyond the context in which it is developed and practiced. By looking into a specific health problem (LBP) this project will contribute to the lacuna of knowledge concerning if and how experiential aspects of skillfulness is transferable, and potentially beneficial when facing musculoskeletal problems like LBP.

#### Methodology and design

In total the comparative set up involves 24 participants seeking treatment for longer periods (more than 4 months) of low back pain. The design involves three groups of 8 participants in each: Group a) elite/highly talented athletes, b) prof. or semi-prof. dancers, and c) non-athletes.

As part of the application for the open call, the PhD applicants will be asked to present a research plan including: Their take on the two phased design and when and how to handle and plan workshops with athletes, non-athletes (patients) coaches/trainers, health professionals (including chiropractors and physiotherapists). As a first and important step we expect the results of this project to affect how health practitioners relate to and involve the patients' history of movement experiences in the treatment. We also expect the results to form the ground for further research developing ways of communicating and setting up plans or strategies for keeping on moving despite LBP. in the clinical setting. This way the project will provide important new ground for impacting the treatment of LBP for athletes and expectably also non-athletes in the future.

*Phase I* involves a short-term ethnographical fieldwork, performed by following a selected number of participants in each group (in total 6-10) in their everyday life. This way of performing fieldwork has also been addressed as a person-centered way of performing fieldwork (47, 49). In concrete, the PhD student (NN) is to closely follow one participant – at a time and over several days (minimum five days) - in various contextual settings of the participant's everyday activities, and conduct brief, informal interviews as part of this fieldwork (48). The aim is to describe experiences, behaviors, and practices as they play out in the everyday life of the participants. Professor Douglas Hollan (Department of Anthropology, UCLA, Los Angeles), one of the central international researchers in this method (47, 49), will be engaged in this first phase

(confirmed), to discuss and validate the way participant's everyday movement activities are closely observed and described by the researcher and reflected about by the participant. This fieldwork forms the ground for preparing and setting up in-depth phenomenological interviews. *Phase II* addresses the phase of performing these in-depth phenomenological interviews (21, 46) of 90-120 minutes which will be carried out with all 24 participants.

Methodologically, the project is based on an interdisciplinary approach *integrating ethnographical fieldwork and phenomenology* (21, 43-46) which involves the following iterative and overlapping phases: **1**. Specification of phenomenological concepts of relevance to the specific topic in focus of the investigation (here: bodily self-awareness) **2**. Generating empirical data on the contextualized conditions of each participant's lifeworld using observations and/or interviews **3**. Coding and condensing data on enculturated field-specific conditions using in vivo – or emic – codes. **4**. Engaging phenomenological concepts in the further analysis, to identify central themes across participants' experiences.

As indicated, the project involves a comparative aspect, a further analytical phase will be involved: **5**. Using the findings from phase 3 and 4 to look for diversities and commonalities in the degree and ways in which participants move and the ways the different dimensions of bodily self-awareness is in use by the different kinds of athletes (sports and dance) and non-athletes in their everyday life handling LBP. When comparing and looking for diversities and commonalities, we specifically look for (a) the degrees of details in participants' descriptions connected to their awareness of their body (b) which dimensions of bodily self-awareness (see state of the art: bodily self-awareness) seems to dominate, and (c) the ways in which participants' bodily self-awareness shifts or fluctuates between dominant dimensions: the pre-reflective, the reflective, and the felt dimension (corresponding to the body being absent to awareness; the body being the object of attention, and the body present without being objectified). In line with the way in which multiple case studies can be used to highlight diversities between cases of lived complexities (50-51), participants' everyday movement practices and experiences will also be inductively analysed to identify other potential topics and themes that indicate diversities and/or commonalities within groups of athletes (dance and sports) and non-athletes, as well as across the different groups.

SDU provide access to the use of Amberscripts and Nvivo which will be used to assist the process of transcribing and coding, respectively. We will recruit participants via networks of physiotherapists and chiropractors and from "*Rygcenter Syddanmark*". We will reach out to the professional environments of dancers in Denmark including the Royal Ballet and The Dancehalls (PI has an ongoing contact to both these fields and institutions of the professional dance environments). The Danish Sports Chiropractic Association – President Dr. Corrie Myburgh will

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support and facilitate recruitment of athletes(confirmed). To the degree necessary we will reach out to municipal centers for rehabilitation training.

Ethics and data management: The project will follow SDU guidelines and regulations for ethics, GDPR and data protection. All participants will receive written information about the project. The participants will have an information and debriefing meeting before and after fieldwork and/or interviews. In the information meeting, they will be provided with detailed information about the project that explains how the interviews and/or fieldwork will take place. The participants will also have an opportunity to ask questions about the project, and discuss any other considerations they might have. The debriefing meeting will focus on informing participants about the analysis and follow up on their experiences regarding specific events and/or reflections elicited by observations and/or interviews. Potential interpersonal sensitive matters in relation to the PhD student NN will be specifically addressed during these two meetings. Further, participants will be given information so that if any issue should arise during observation, or interviews they can contact the host the PI, S. Ravn and/or SDU's ethics office. The consent form will include the information that must be provided by SDU to the data subjects pursuant to GDPR art. 13.

Throughout the fieldwork and interviews the PhD student will follow '*Unexpected findings policy*': aspects that concern private matters of the participants (e.g. to partner, parents, close friends, etc.), health-related issues beyond handling LBP, political engagements, or the like will not be the focus of observations. Observational notes on these matters will be excluded in a first round of reading through generated material.

A detailed data management plan (DMP) will be written using the DMP online facilities at SDU including supervision and review performed by the DMP group at SDU. Datamanagement will follow safeguards for collection and recording, as well as organizing and storing the data according to SDU guidelines and regulations. OneDrive which is approved for storage of personal data at SDU will be used. The PI and NN will consult an expert in anonymization techniques so that the de-identified data set can potentially be made accessible through open access. Regarding data-flow, the PI and NN will describe when and how observations form the background for adjusting the interview guide for formal interviews, how and when the PI has access to the data and participates in the phases of analysing these and when an expert in anonymization will be involved to secure open access to the degree possible.

*Dissemination:* Findings will be published in international journals spanning across qualitative research, phenomenology, and health (e.g. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*;

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*Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences; Chiropractic & Manual Therapies* ) and presented and discussed on national workshops and seminars with chiropractors, coaches, and athletes.

### The PhD -candidate and environment

# The ideal candidate is expected to have experience in qualitative research, interests in sports, and a strong theoretical background in, for example, phenomenology, psychology, and/or

*anthropology*. The successful candidate will be enrolled in the PhD school at the Faculty of Health, SDU. They will be affiliated with MoCS, at the department of Sports Sciences and Clinical Biomechanics (IOB). IOB has 47 PhD students enrolled (March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024). Office space and facilities will be offered in the MoCS area at IOB.

Planned project period: April, 2025 – March, 2028.

## The project contributes to UN nations goals for sustainable development by targeting,

**especially,** goal 3: "ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages" **A further explanation of the contribution**: Low-back-pain is one of the primary reasons people cannot go to work. The amount of people suffering from low-back-pain is increasing. In Denmark more than a million people suffer from Low-back-pain (2). Thus, contributing to finding ways to support current treatments – involving participants' movement experiences and competences clearly contribute to goal 3 in ways that encourage sustainable development on individual terms.

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