

A History of Kinesiology

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the importance of context in understanding historical change.
2. Describe the difference between physical education as a profession and physical education as a discipline.
3. Explain why departments of physical education became departments of kinesiology.
4. Recognize the importance of integrating kinesiology's subdisciplines.

KEY TERMS

academic discipline
disciplinary specialization
embryonic period

kinesiology
profession of physical education

Introduction

What we call ourselves matters. The discipline we know today as kinesiology has gone through several different names, and with each change came debate, contention, and a particular emphasis that gives the field its current meaning. We are now well into the second century of kinesiology's many evolutions, and a brief historical analysis is important to understanding where we came from, who we were, who we are, and where we might be going.

To appreciate the history of kinesiology requires recognizing its key precursor—physical education. In this case, physical education does not refer to the classes you took in elementary or high school, or even the skill or lifestyle classes you may take in college. Instead, it represents academic departments of physical education in higher education, many of which are now called departments of kinesiology. These are units dedicated to creating and sharing knowledge about physical activity and human movement, and as you will find in this chapter, these departments now include a variety of subdisciplines—specialized domains of study within the broader subject.

The Embryonic Period: 1880s–1900s

embryonic period

The first stage of the development of kinesiology (1880–1900) in the United States.

Sport studies scholar Joan Paul (1996) classifies the era between 1880 and 1900 as the **embryonic period** for physical education. In other words, the field was in the very beginning stages of development. During this time, advocates recognized the value of activities such as gymnastics (which then referred to a series of precise and regimented exercises), calisthenics, physical culture, and physical training to encourage health and physical fitness. However, physical education did not have a central mission, and multiple, competing philosophies and exercise systems created a lack of organization and coherence.

What encouraged the need for formalized physical education? Historical understanding requires situating the phenomenon in question within its historical context. It is important to ask what the larger social, cultural, political, and economic issues were at the time, how those issues affected physical education and, in turn, how physical education influenced those historical circumstances. For example, the modernization and industrialization of society in the 19th century reduced the amount of physical activity required in the average American's day. Activists therefore worried about the

lack of “vigor” in people’s lives, and promoted exercise as the antidote to a “soft” life. At the same time, lingering concerns about military preparedness resulted in the establishment of physical training programs. And with the large increase in immigration during this time, reformers turned to sport and physical activity to address their anxieties about health, assimilation, and Americanization. Thus, physical education developed within the context of great historical change and was designed to meet numerous social needs.

In the 1880s and 1890s, most programs aimed at training physical educators were located in private normal (or teachers’) colleges. Instructors of these programs were often physicians, illustrating the close ties between the field and medicine and the biological sciences. Accordingly, the curriculum included aspects of anatomy and physiology, physics, and anthropometry (the scientific study of the measurements and proportions of the human body), as well as educational theory.

Physicians made up the majority of the first members of the Association for the Advancement of Physical Education, established in 1885 as a way to begin to institutionalize and legitimize the area of study. The following year, the organization (which had changed its name to the American Association for the Advancement of Physical Education, or AAAPPE; see **TABLE 3-1** for a series of name changes that offer historical insight) published the *American Physical Education Review* (now the *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*), a journal that disseminated and encouraged professional knowledge. At the 1890 AAAPPE conference, physician Luther Halsey Gulick declared physical education a “new profession” that involved “a profound knowledge

TABLE 3-1 The Evolution of SHAPE America

1885	Association for the Advancement of Physical Education
1886	American Association for the Advancement of Physical Education
1903	American Physical Education Association
1937	American Association for Health and Physical Education
1938	American Association for Health and Physical Education and Recreation
1974	American Alliance for Health, Physical Education and Recreation
1979	American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance
2013	Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE) America

of man [*sic*] through physiology, anatomy, psychology, history and philosophy” (p. 65). Although many think that the subdisciplinary movement of kinesiology is something that originated in the mid-20th century, it is clear that it has deeper roots (Park, 1989).

The Profession of Physical Education: 1900–1960

In the early 1900s, physical education also included elements of nutrition and hygiene, which originally signified elements of exercise, but later aligned more with what we think of today as health education. Before long, however, physical educators began to emphasize the value of play, games, and sport, leaving behind the gymnastic tradition. This happened in both men’s and women’s programs, which were almost always separate from one another.

Men’s intercollegiate sport grew evermore popular during this time, and physical education programs extended their training to the preparation of coaches. After a brief period of intercollegiate sport for women, the majority of women physical educators advocated intramural and interclass athletics and, more often, dance, instruction in posture, hygiene, and “play days.” These activities were supposed to promote cooperation, instead of the type of competition that would damage participants’ bodies and minds. The “play attitude” promoted the “ideal of universal opportunity for participation in athletic activities” (Sefton, 1941, pp. 7–8). In this way, physical educators kept tight control over the development of women’s sport, a situation that lasted throughout much of the 20th century.

Initially, many programs, for both men and women, operated under the name “physical culture,” but in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the term **physical education** became the dominant title for the field. Most faculty “did not carry active programs of research in any area of specialization,” but instead focused on teaching and advising their students (Massengale & Swanson, 1997, p. 7). Education “was dedicated to acquiring motor skills and methods of teaching these skills, planning curriculum, and the organization and administration of programs in athletics, health, and recreation as well as physical education” (Corbin, 1993, p. 84).

Times of war offer occasions to assess the physical fitness of the nation and often highlight the importance of physical education. This happened during World War I, when military officials rejected an alarming number of young men drafted into service due to “lack of fitness.” As a result, many

profession of physical education

The second stage of the development of kinesiology that occurred in the 1920s and 1930s, when *physical education* became the dominant title for the field.

states enacted mandatory physical education instruction in public schools, which, in turn, created a need for trained and qualified teachers.

It happened again during World War II, when physical assessments deemed many potential draftees unfit to serve. Events in the postwar era also pointed to the need to bolster national health. The 1953 Kraus-Weber tests demonstrated that American youth were less fit than their European counterparts. President Dwight D. Eisenhower suffered a heart attack, which directed greater attention to the benefits of exercise for both health and rehabilitation. For these and other reasons, in 1956 President Eisenhower initiated the President's Council on Youth Fitness (now the President's Council on Physical Fitness, Sports, and Nutrition—once again, what we call ourselves matters). This high-profile, government-sanctioned program boosted the profession of physical education.

The end of World War II marked the beginning of Cold War hostilities between the United States and the Soviet Union. In the absence of “hot war” (or actual fighting), political and ideological tensions spilled over into symbolic arenas in which the two sides could compete for dominance. Sport was one such arena. In fact, the Cold War helped convince women physical educators and others to revise their views on women's sport and begin to promote elite-level training and competition. During this same time, administrators of high-profile men's athletic programs began to move into separate units and away from their historical homes within physical education. As coaches left physical education, it became possible for administrators to hire faculty dedicated to teaching and research.

Like sport, scientific innovation provided another place where Cold War opponents could compete. In 1957, the Soviets successfully launched Sputnik 1, the first artificial satellite, sparking a great deal of concern about the status of science education in the United States. This affected physical education and incited calls to “scientize” the field.

Physical educators added their voices to these calls. Some of this impulse came on the heels of James Conant's 1963 book, *The Education of American Teachers*. Conant, the former president of Harvard University, was critical,

STOP AND THINK

- What do you know about the 1980 “Miracle on Ice”? As dramatized in the 2004 film *Miracle*, the U.S. men's Olympic hockey team defeated the heavily favored team from the Soviet Union, which had won six of the seven previous games. What was the historical importance of this event?
- This movie was produced by Walt Disney Pictures. Why did this story grab Disney's attention? It was a game to get to the medal round, not the final showdown for the gold medal.
- Can you think of other examples where the politics of different groups or countries play out on sport's symbolic stage?



writing, “I am far from impressed by what I have heard and read about graduate work in the field of physical educations ... To my mind, a university should cancel graduate programs in this area” (p. 201). As you might imagine, this alarmed physical educators, who already felt as though their work did not receive academic respect (see Twietmeyer, 2012).

The year after Conant published *The Education of American Teachers*, Franklin Henry, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, pushed the idea that physical education should be an **academic discipline**, or a branch of knowledge designed to produce and disseminate expert knowledge, as opposed to a program that trained future physical educators and coaches for a *profession*. Henry (1964) claimed “that the proper academic study for physical education would only come by grounding the discipline in theory.” He continued:

academic discipline

A branch of knowledge designed to produce and disseminate expert knowledge.

STOP AND THINK

- What are the “core,” or required, courses in the department of kinesiology at your school?
- Why do you think you have to take these courses?
- What do they contribute to your understanding of human movement and physical activity?



An academic discipline is an organized body of knowledge collectively embraced in a formal course of learning. The acquisition of such knowledge is assumed to be an adequate and worthy objective as such, without any demonstration or requirement of practical application. The content is theoretical and scholarly as distinguished from technical and professional. (p. 32)

Henry defined the “scholarly field” of physical education as one that includes “anatomy, physics and physiology, cultural anthropology, history and sociology, as well as psychology” (p. 33). No matter the students’ career goals, he argued, they should be educated in these areas that would provide a broad-based understanding of human physical activity.

The Academic Discipline of Physical Education: 1960–1980

In the early 1960s, prodded by the words of Conant and Henry, members of the American Academy of Physical Education sought to determine what should constitute the discipline’s “body of knowledge.” The subsequent Big Ten Body-of-Knowledge Symposium identified six areas of specialization:

(1) administrative theory in athletics and physical education, (2) biomechanics, (3) exercise physiology, (4) history and philosophy of physical education, (5) motor learning/sport psychology, and (6) sociology and sport education. These subdomains, along with several others, are currently recognized within kinesiology.

Consequently, the 1960s and the 1970s fostered specialization within physical education (**TABLE 3-2**). Members of the various subgroups formed their own organizations, journals, texts, and specialized courses within the major. With this trend came greater respect for the field and the production of new knowledge, but “disciplinization” also had some negative consequences. First, the move devalued the importance of physical education as it pertained to the preparation of teachers and coaches—suggesting that practitioners of physical education were somehow worth less than those who researched it.

Second, **disciplinary specialization** brought fragmentation, such that the subdomains too often acted independently, rather than in concert. Instead of integrating their knowledge for a more holistic understanding of human movement, scholars became isolated from one another. This lack of integration and unification troubled physical educators, who worried that students would fail to appreciate and, more important, assimilate the depth and

disciplinary specialization

The fragmenting of the components of a discipline into multiple subdomains.

TABLE 3-2 The Evolution of Subdisciplinary Organizations

1953	American College of Sport Medicine
1967	International Society of Biomechanics in Sports
1968	North American Society for the Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity
1972	North American Society for Sport History
1972	Philosophic Society for the Study of Sport
1973	International Society of Biomechanics
1974	The Association for the Study of Play
1978	North American Society for the Sociology of Sport
1983	Sport Literature Association
1985	North American Society for Sport Management
1985	Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology

breadth of information in their respective programs. They also worried that researchers in the subdisciplines could just as easily belong in departments of physiology, physics, biology, history, sociology, philosophy, and psychology as they could in physical education, which might, in turn, render departments of physical education obsolete in the eyes of campus administrators.

The number of programs dedicated to teacher training, often called *pedagogy*, started to decline. Some departments even eliminated the programs altogether. In time, “physical education” no longer seemed an appropriate title for the discipline. One by one, different units began to change their names, becoming departments of exercise science, sport science, sport studies, human movement, human kinetics, and kinesiology, to name a few.

STOP AND THINK

- What comes to mind when you think of the term *physical education*?
- What are the stereotypes associated with someone who studies physical education? Are they different for men and women?
- Where do you think those stereotypes came from?



In the 1980s, colleges and universities used as many as 100 different names for the area of study once known as physical education (Corbin, 1993, p. 85). By 1990, wrote Karl Newell, it was not “an overstatement to suggest that physical education in higher education is in a state of chaos” (1990a, p. 228). One way to remedy this, Newell (1989) argued, was to bring everyone together under the umbrella of *kinesiology*. He offered the following rationale for this name:

- It was representative of the entire field.
- It sounded academic.
- It was succinct.
- It was neutral with respect to the major subdomain debates on each dimension.
- It was already established as the departmental title in a number of leading academic institutions.

Not everyone has agreed with the wholesale change to kinesiology, and several departments have resisted the trend.

As we consider the subdisciplinary movement, it is important to understand that kinesiology not only *has* a history—it also *includes* history. Sport history is an important subdiscipline that emerged in the late 1960s and

early 1970s. Sport historians consider a range of fascinating topics, including organized athletics, physical education, physical culture, active leisure, dance, recreation, and other physical practices. Historians look at these topics as they relate to technology, media, education, religion, the military, race, ethnicity, class, sex, gender, sexuality, disability, popular culture, politics, the environment, public policy, geography, and ideas about the body. In the United States and Canada, the North American Society for Sport History has been the most important organization for work in this area, although sport historians are often involved with other organizations in kinesiology, sport studies, history, American studies, women's and gender studies, and popular culture.

Kinesiology as a Unifying Title: 1990–Present

The word **kinesiology** can be broken down into the Greek words *kinesis*, which means “movement,” and *ology*, or “the study of.” Newell was certainly not the first to suggest the word. Within physical education, it has been used since at least 1886 (Paul, 1996, p. 534). However, the 1990s brought a concerted quest for a common professional identity and, according to Newell (1990b), “*kinesiology* provides the best option in promoting a broad-based disciplinary, professional, and performance approach to the study of physical activity” (p. 273). Debates about the title and focus of kinesiology continue to rage. Some critics contend that the word is too esoteric for the general population. Others find the term's focus too narrow, aligned more with structural–functional research, particularly biomechanics, and divorced from practical application. Still others contend that guiding concepts, such as “movement” and “physical activity,” are too broad and will lead (indeed, have led) to topics of study that deviate far afield from the field's roots in physical education. We continue to question what areas should constitute our collective body of knowledge.

STOP AND THINK



Take a look at the top sports stories of today. These stories have a history. Maybe it is a story about doping in sport.

- When did athletes first start using performance-enhancing drugs?
- What types of drugs did they use?
- How have methods to test for those drugs changed over time?

Maybe you find a story about a top woman athlete. Did you know that organized sport for women did not really gain popularity and acceptance until the 1970s? A historical perspective helps us understand contemporary issues.

- Why did it take so long for organized sport for women to gain acceptance?
- What were the reasons for keeping women out of sport?

kinesiology

The study of the art and science of human movement.

TABLE 3-3 The Evolution of the National Academy of Kinesiology

1904	Academy of Physical Education
1926	American Academy of Physical Education
1993	American Academy of Kinesiology and Physical Education
2010	National Academy of Kinesiology

However, kinesiology is frequently, though not entirely, the overriding title for the many things we do, study, and promote. If you take a look at **TABLE 3-3**, for example, you can see that what was once the American Academy of Physical Education gradually added “kinesiology” to its title and eventually dropped the phrase “physical education” altogether to become the National Academy of Kinesiology (NAK). The organization’s dual purpose is

to encourage and promote the study and educational applications of the art and science of human movement and physical activity and to honor by election to its membership persons who have directly or indirectly contributed significantly to the study of and/or application of the art and science of human movement and physical activity (NAK, 2016).

Embedded in this description is an appreciation of the field as both a profession and a discipline.

It bears mention that the need for unity also extends to work done within departments of kinesiology—not just among them. Kinesiology is composed of many subdisciplines; it is therefore *multidisciplinary*. But multi- and even cross-disciplinarity falls short, argues Gill (2007): “*Inter-disciplinary* implies actual connections among subareas, and an interdisciplinary kinesiology that integrates subdisciplinary knowledge is essential” (p. 275). As you move forward in your studies, your challenge is to start to see the many ways that kinesiology’s subdisciplines inform one another—to see cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary connections. Your ultimate goal is to take an integrative perspective to consider the many ways that knowledge from each area informs, enhances, and complements your understanding of human movement.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

From its humble beginnings in the 19th century, the field we know today as kinesiology has gone through many changes. From unorganized efforts to provide health and fitness opportunities for children, to the profession and eventual discipline of physical education, to the move toward kinesiology, physical activity and human movement have remained our core concerns. Kinesiology includes subdisciplines from the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, all of which help us understand how, when, and why people move.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Kinesiology has not always been called kinesiology. What was the field called in the late 1800s and early 1900s?
2. During physical education's "embryonic period" (1880s–1900s), what were some of the larger social, cultural, political, and economic issues that encouraged the need for formalized physical education?
3. How did physical educators feel about intercollegiate sports for women in the first half of the 20th century?
4. How did the various wars in the 20th century influence physical education?
5. Do you think physical education is a discipline or a profession? Is there a difference between a discipline and a profession?
6. What are the positive and negative aspects of specialization and disciplinization?
7. Do you think *kinesiology* is the best name for your department?
8. What is the difference between multidisciplinary and subdisciplinary?

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