Feeling, Deciding, and Relating: Emotion as a Key Component in the Multidimensional Architecture of Motor Conduct

Sentir, decidir y relacionarse. La emoción, pieza clave en la arquitectura multidimensional de la conducta motriz

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Abstract:

Grounded in the epistemological foundations of motor praxeology, this study explores the role of emotions as a key to unlocking the "secret code" of motor conduct in ludic situations, with a particular focus on traditional sporting games (TSG). Since 2007, the Motor Action Research Group (GIAM) has shown that the internal logic of each TSG—defined by its type of motor interaction, roles, or competitive elements—generates distinct emotional experiences, deeply connected to cognitive, relational, and organic processes. Understanding these emotional states proves essential for transforming motor conflicts and fostering both emotional and relational well-being from an integral and equitable perspective. The central methodological challenge lies in capturing the lived complexity of these emotional experiences. To address this, GIAM has developed research designs based on mixed methods, transdisciplinary approaches, and tools attuned to the ludic context. This multidimensional lens allows for an interpretation of emotional meaning in relation to the interactions, decisions, and physical effort shaping each motor experience.

Keywords:

Motor praxeology; mixed methods; transdisciplinarity; relational well-being; emotional well-being.

Resumen:

Este trabajo, inscrito en los fundamentos epistemológicos de la praxiología motriz, indaga en el papel de las emociones como clave para desentrañar el "código secreto" de la conducta motriz en situaciones lúdicas, con especial atención a los juegos deportivos tradicionales (JDT). Desde 2007, el Grupo de Investigación en Acción Motriz (GIAM) ha evidenciado que la lógica interna de cada JDT —a través del tipo de interacción motriz, roles o presencia de competición— genera experiencias emocionales singulares, íntimamente ligadas a procesos cognitivos, relacionales y orgánicos. Comprender estos estados emocionales se revela esencial para transformar conflictos motores, favorecer el bienestar relacional y emocional desde una perspectiva integral y equitativa. El principal reto metodológico consiste en captar la complejidad vivencial de estas emociones. Por ello, el GIAM ha diseñado investigaciones usando métodos mixtos, enfoques transdisciplinares y herramientas sensibles al contexto lúdico. Esta mirada multidimensional permite interpretar el significado emocional en función de las relaciones, decisiones y esfuerzo físico que configuran cada vivencia motriz.

Palabras claves:

Praxiología motriz; métodos mixtos, transdisciplinariedad, bienestar relacional, bienestar emocional.

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1. Understanding Emotions in the Context of Motor Situations in Light of Motor Praxeology

> *"The immediate result of emotions is a temporary change in the state of the body itself, and in the state of the brain structures that map the body and support thought"* (Damasio, 2005, p. 56).

More than fifty years ago, Parlebas (1970) stated that affectivity is the key to motor conduct. His point of departure considered Piaget's contributions, although his critical perspective led him to proclaim that emotion is not an experience parallel to cognition, but rather that the two are inseparable aspects that cannot function independently.

The scientific endeavor to unveil the complex phenomenon of emotional experience in the context of motor experience led the Motor Action Research Group (GIAM, at INEFC) to initiate, in 2007, a line of research on emotional states in sporting games and motor situations in general. Since then, scientific evidence has enabled us to understand that every motor situation possesses an internal logic (an identity card or internal organizational pattern) that configures a type of internal relationship translated into motor conduct charged with emotional meaning (Parlebas, 2001; Lagardera & Lavega, 2011). Within this framework, motor education, sport, and traditional sporting games (TSG) cease to be mere settings for technical execution and become privileged laboratories of emotional experiences (Lavega-Burgués, March-Llanes, & Moya-Higueras, 2018).

Two key concepts are essential in studies grounded in motor action theory or motor praxeology:

a) Internal logic, or the identity card of any motor situation, which activates a singular motor experience associated with the way one relates to others, space, time, and material objects (Parlebas, 2001). Two games or sports are different if the problems activated by internal logic in relation to these four dimensions are different.

b) Motor conduct, which refers to "the meaningful organization of the actions and reactions of a person who acts, the relevance of whose expression is of a motor nature. Motor conduct can only be observed indirectly; it manifests itself through motor behavior whose observable data are endowed with meaning, and which is experienced consciously or unconsciously by the acting person (...) the meaning of the lived experience directly associated with it: intention, perception, mental image, project, motivation, desire, frustration... In fact, motor conduct cannot be reduced either to a sequence of observable manifestations, or to pure consciousness detached from reality. It corresponds to the totality of the acting person, to the unified synthesis of meaningful action or, if preferred, of enacted meaning. This dual perspective, combining the external point of view (observable behavior) and the internal meaning (bodily experience: perception, mental image, anticipation, emotion...), allows the concept of motor conduct to play a crucial role in physical education" (Parlebas, 2001, p. 85).

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Motor conduct refers to the subjective experience through which each person gives meaning to every motor experience, activating in a unified and indivisible manner the organic (physical effort, physical capacities), cognitive (decisions), relational, and emotional dimensions.

Passing the ball to a teammate is, at the same time, an action requiring energetic and coordinative commitment (precision, power...); a relationship (passing to Marta and not to Carlos); a decision (passing to a teammate instead of shooting at the basket); and an emotion (jumping for joy after making such a difficult pass) (Lagardera & Lavega, 2003; Alonso-Roque et al., 2020).

To advance along this scientific path pursued by GIAM members, a third key concept must be incorporated into applied research on affectivity:

c) Domains of motor action. Every TSG or motor situation corresponds to a class of motor experience. Parlebas (2003) proposed a classification based on three fundamental pedagogical principles historically promoted by educational traditions: the need to educate students in relation to themselves, to others, and to the physical environment. Parlebas distinguishes, first, psychomotor situations (relation with oneself), in which the person acts without motor interaction with others—as in the long jump or bowling. Second, he identifies sociomotor situations (relation with others), in which motor action is determined by cooperation, opposition, or a combination of both. In addition, these situations (psychomotor or sociomotor) may take place in a stable environment (without informational uncertainty) or in an unstable environment (with unforeseen events and decision-making). This double dimension gives rise to eight classes of motor experiences, organized into what are known as domains of motor action (DMA). DMA constitute a key conceptual unit both for teachers—when planning motor education content—and for scientific research aimed at understanding the effects of these situations on participants' emotional states.

From this perspective, research designs developed by GIAM consider the type of motor situation (e.g., domain of motor action; games with or without competition; roles...) as independent variables, and the effects these produce on the different dimensions activated by motor conduct (e.g., emotional states, socio-affective relations, motor conflicts, types of decisions, physical effort...) as dependent variables. Depending on the study design, other independent variables are also included, such as sex, age, cultural background, or the pedagogical strategies applied by educators. Studies adopt a wide range of methodological approaches: from ethnographic designs, quasi-experimental studies, and clinical trials, to qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approaches. Overall, the aim is to unveil the complexity of the emotional phenomenon by deepening our understanding of the subjective meaning that people attribute to their participation in motor situations or TSG.

The inspiration for GIAM's early work is found in emotional education models developed, among others, by Bisquerra and Lazarus, who emphasize the importance of identifying, understanding, and regulating emotions in meaningful contexts. Studies conducted in primary education, secondary education, upper secondary education, and university settings agree that motor situations offer an ideal context for educating emotional awareness, regulating negative emotions (e.g., to transform motor conflicts), and enhancing socio-emotional competences (Muñoz-Arroyave et al., 2021; Sáez de Ocáriz Granja, 2011, 2013).

Within this framework, motor praxeology provides a solid epistemological foundation for predicting and designing emotional experiences based on the internal logic of TSG and the domains of motor action. This places 21st-century motor education in a strategic position, aligned

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with the Sustainable Development Goals, education for coexistence and gender equality, as well as health and emotional well-being, through the intentional use of games and sports—especially traditional ones—as devices for emotional and relational literacy (Rillo-Albert et al., 2021; Muñoz-Arroyave et al., 2021).

2. What We Know So Far: A Synthesis of Recent Evidence

2.1. Internal Logic as the Architect of Emotional States

Comparative studies across domains of motor action consistently show that sociomotor games elicit more intense emotions than psychomotor games. In particular, cooperation is mostly associated with high-intensity positive emotional states, whereas opposition and cooperation-opposition tend to provoke more ambivalent experiences (such as pleasure-tension or desire-fear), with a greater presence of negative emotions that can, nevertheless, be regulated pedagogically (Niubó-Solé et al., 2022; Muñoz-Arroyave et al., 2021).

In contrast, non-competitive psychomotor games configure a different emotional map: students' well-being is linked to the game itself, the absence of a final result, and self-imposed challenge. In this context, participants report states of pleasure, satisfaction, and calm when the challenge is well adjusted and freedom of exploration exists; by contrast, they experience discomfort when monotony, excessive effort, or repeated failure is perceived (Lavega-Burgués et al., 2020).

2.2. Roles and Traditional Sporting Games as an Emotional Induction Procedure

> *"The flow of our emotions guides our actions in the changing circumstances of our living, so that all our actions are actions that belong to that culture"* (Maturana & Verden-Zöller, 2003, p. 26).

Another line of studies has focused on so-called paradoxical games, in which internal logic triggers relational contradictions: players may simultaneously be teammates and opponents, giving rise to alliances and betrayals during motor action (Parlebas, 2001). Research carried out with paradoxical TSG (such as Sitting Ball, Four Corners, and Pitchers) shows that sociomotor roles are key units of analysis (Lavega-Burgués et al., 2018; Lavega-Burgués et al., 2024) for revealing the emotional plot experienced by participants. The Alive role, which allows players to capture others or actively intervene in the dynamics of the game, evokes a greater presence of intense positive emotions and a lower intensity of negative emotions; by contrast, this same role, when exposed to the risk of being captured, awakens a greater intensity of negative emotions (fear, anger, sadness) and a lower level of positive emotions (Moya-Higueras et al., 2023).

Roles also play a central part in another group of TSG, such as team duels. Thus, the praxeological analysis of emotional states in the game of Marro has shown that each role (Home, Alive, Prisoner) activates differentiated emotional experiences, modulated by the game's internal logic. The Home role usually generates well-being linked to safety, although it may also provoke discomfort due to passivity. The Alive role is the one that most strongly promotes positive affectivity (joy, pride, social connection) because of its strategic prominence, full of relational exchanges. In turn, the Prisoner role concentrates higher levels of discomfort (frustration, sad-

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ness, helplessness), especially when participants perceive unfair behavior or rule violations. Altogether, the study confirms that emotional well-being does not depend exclusively on the outcome, but rather on the subjective meaning attributed to the lived experience, thus corroborating that affectivity—as Parlebas already pointed out (1970)—modulates motor conduct (Lavega-Burgués & Mallén-Lacambra, 2024).

Along the same line of research, the emotional experience associated with roles in traditional sporting games with original motor interaction structures has also been analyzed. This is the case of the game The Bear, the Guardian, and the Hunters, in which players move in a circular, chained sequence through the three roles. The analysis of the meaning of affectivity reveals that each role activates differentiated yet interdependent emotional units. In particular, the Bear role concentrates a form of regulated motor aggressiveness that functions as a true "affective magnet" by becoming the center of emotional tension within this laboratory of interpersonal relationships (Lavega-Burgués et al., 2023). Thus, the game makes it possible to render visible an "invisible affectivity" that can only be understood through mixed methods capable of integrating lived emotional intensity (quantitative data) with the meanings subjectively expressed by the participants themselves (qualitative data).

Taken together, these studies legitimize TSG as educational procedures for emotional induction that are at once ecological and controllable. These are proposals compatible with the standards of experimental psychology while respecting the specificity of motor action, where symbolism and emotional meaning are inseparably linked to relationships and to decisions associated with roles. By revealing how emotions emerge from the interplay among roles, rules, decisions, and bonds, this body of research consolidates the pedagogical and scientific value of TSG as privileged settings for exploring and educating affectivity through motor conduct.

2.3. Emotions, Conflicts, and Socio-Emotional Well-Being

Another of GIAM's research lines provides evidence when it comes to transforming motor conflicts associated with tension in certain interpersonal relationships, linked to poor regulation of negative emotions. Initially, Sáez de Ocáriz (2011) characterized the concept of motor conflict, introduced the conflictivity index tool, and examined the relationship between motor conflicts and the different domains of motor action. Later, Rillo-Albert (2021) developed the GIAM model through an intervention program based on competitive cooperation-opposition games. Empirical findings show that this pedagogical approach significantly reduces motor conflicts and the intensity of negative emotions, while fostering students' relational and emotional well-being (Rillo-Albert et al., 2021).

2.4. Gender, Sporting Footprint, and Emotional Equity in TSG

The emotions experienced during traditional sporting games are not the same for all participants; to a great extent, they depend on gender and on one's history of physical practice (the so-called sporting footprint). Research shows that when individuals have a rich and diverse trajectory in ludomotor practices, especially in cooperative motor situations, they experience more intense positive emotions (Alonso-Roque et al., 2020).

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Among adolescents, these intense positive emotions have been found to predominate in both boys and girls, regardless of the type of domain of motor action, thereby reinforcing the value of play as a coeducational tool (Alonso-Roque et al., 2020). However, some studies warn of imbalances in emotional experience. In games such as Pitchers, certain roles grant more power, visibility, or leadership, and tend to benefit boys more in mixed groups. This may generate inequality in participation and in equitable access to emotionally positive experiences (Muñoz-Arroyave et al., 2021).

The good news is that the pedagogical design of the game and the teacher's intervention can make a difference. If action is taken critically and intentionally, it is possible to redistribute the "powers of the game," question gender stereotypes, and build more equitable experiences for all students (Mallén-Lacambra et al., 2024).

2.5. A 360° Vision: Emotions, Relationships, Decisions, and Energy. Different Facets of the Same Polyhedral Reality: Motor Conduct

> *"Since the mind arises in a brain that is integral to the organism, the mind is part of this tightly interwoven apparatus. In other words, body, brain, and mind are manifestations of a single organism. Although we may dissect them under the microscope, for scientific purposes they are certainly inseparable under normal operating circumstances"* (Damasio, 2005, p. 186).

Inspired by this integral vision of Damasio, GIAM has developed a line of research that conceives motor conduct as a polyhedral phenomenon in which emotional, decisional, relational, and organic dimensions converge inseparably. This approach, known as the 360° vision, has shown that TSG are privileged contexts for activating multimodal learning aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (Muñoz-Arroyave et al., 2021; Lavega-Burgués et al., 2020).

Recent studies have shown that every motor action in a TSG is the result of complex multidimensional chains intertwining physical effort, decision-making, social relationships, and emotional experiences. For example, in the game of Marro, it has been demonstrated how each role (Home, Alive, Prisoner) entails specific physical demands, temporal strategic decisions, and intense and differentiated emotions, all detected through sequential action patterns (T-patterns) (Lavega-Burgués & Mallén-Lacambra, 2024).

Likewise, research on the game of Pitchers has revealed that its internal logic generates a subjective cyclical temporal experience distinct for each role, accompanied by interdependent relational, affective, and energetic chains (Martin-Martínez et al., 2021). These experiences show how subroles grant power, visibility, or invisibility, and activate feelings of leadership, cooperation, or exclusion depending on the position occupied within the game network.

The 360° vision has also been enriched by analyses supported by semiology linked to motor action (semiotricity, Parlebas, 2001): it has been shown that every motor action acts as a sign carrying relational and affective meanings, and that sociomotor games configure symbolic codes of coexistence (Lavega-Burgués, Rillo-Albert, & Sáez de Ocáriz, 2022). Thus, the "multidimensional chains" that make visible the complexity of motor conduct are consolidated, making it possible to overcome reductionist views focused solely on physical or technical performance.

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Taken together, this approach endorses the pedagogical value of TSG as devices for integral education: they allow students to think, feel, decide, and act simultaneously, integrating body, emotion, and thought in real and meaningful contexts, with the potential to contribute to well-being, coexistence, and sustainability.

3. Challenges and Future Perspectives

The study of emotion in the context of motor situations—and particularly in traditional games and sports—remains a field as fertile as it is complex, requiring a prudent attitude without renouncing scientific rigor. Despite the progress achieved in recent decades, we are still far from fully unveiling the "secret code" that structures motor conduct and turns each game into a unique laboratory of meaning.

Motor conduct refers to a multidimensional network that is difficult to grasp: these meanings, to a large extent invisible, belong to each person's perception of themselves, of others, and of the world around them. Therefore, it is essential to continue developing studies capable of understanding the emotional meaning that emerges within each motor situation. The immediacy of motor actions in play turns each motor conduct into an instant charged with symbolic exchanges, a continuous flow of relationships, decisions, and invested energy that is not always easy to capture.

Although it may be tempting to imagine an "emotional heart-rate monitor" or an "affective GPS" capable of recording, in real time, the meaning accompanying each decision, relationship, or physical effort, this aspiration remains beyond our reach today. However, this technical impossibility should not discourage us; on the contrary, it invites us to combine prudence with audacity and to design alternative strategies that make visible what remains implicit. In this regard, students' statements, self-reports, individual or group interviews, and questionnaires continue to be indispensable tools. Nevertheless, their use must be harmonized with the need to preserve the motor engagement characteristic of physical education classes and sports training.

Hence the interest in proposals better adapted to the dynamics of motor action, such as motor questionnaires: raising an arm to indicate greater or lesser emotional intensity; moving toward one of the four corners of the room to represent a specific affective state; or inviting students to express a brief comment when entering the prisoner area in order to map emotional experiences in real time. These strategies do not replace traditional instruments, but they complement them and help capture the semantic immediacy of play.

In the strictly research domain, it is necessary to deepen mixed-methods designs that integrate quantitative and qualitative data from heterogeneous sources. Only in this way will it be possible to capture the phenomenological richness of motor experience. This challenge requires promoting transdisciplinary research that brings together specialists from fields such as physiology, neuroscience, psychology, sociology, pedagogy, semiology, and also motor praxeology. The convergence of these perspectives will help us approach, step by step, that deep logic constituting the DNA of the game and the DNA of the person who plays.

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4. Conclusions

The body of studies reviewed confirms that motor praxeology offers a solid epistemological framework for understanding emotions in contexts of motor action. The notion of internal logic, the definition of motor conduct, and the classification into domains of motor action allow us to move from a fragmented perspective (technical, physical, or exclusively psychological) to a unitary understanding of motor experience, in which the organic, cognitive, relational, and emotional dimensions are activated inseparably in every play situation. From this perspective, traditional games and sports cease to be mere recreational or childish practices and become genuine laboratories of meaning.

Empirical evidence consistently shows that the relational architecture of TSG (cooperation, opposition, cooperation-opposition, paradox of roles, presence or absence of a final outcome) modulates with precision the emotional states of participants. Comparative results across domains of motor action, role analysis (paradoxical, chained, or team-duel roles), as well as studies on motor conflicts, socio-emotional well-being, sporting footprint, and gender, reinforce the idea that affectivity is not an "addition" to motor conduct, but its deep underlying fabric. Emotion emerges as a privileged indicator of the subjective meaning students attribute to what they experience in play.

At the methodological level, research on emotions and motor conduct has clearly progressed toward more robust designs better adjusted to the complexity of the object of study. The use of mixed methods, the combination of quantitative and qualitative data, the incorporation of specific tools (conflictivity index, sequential T-pattern analysis, emotion questionnaires, real-time recording devices), and openness to transdisciplinary approaches (physiology, neuroscience, psychology, sociology, pedagogy, semiology, praxeology) make it possible to approach more finely that "secret code" structuring the game and emotional experience. Nevertheless, the challenge remains of reconciling the use of measurement instruments with the maintenance of genuine motor engagement in physical education sessions and sports practice.

From a pedagogical point of view, the conclusions are clear: TSG, when selected and guided intentionally, constitute powerful devices for emotional and relational literacy. They make it possible to transform motor conflicts into educational opportunities, promote socio-emotional well-being, question gender stereotypes, redistribute the "powers of the game," and foster more equitable and inclusive participation experiences. In coherence with the Sustainable Development Goals, this line of work places motor education in a strategic position to contribute to coexistence, equality, and students' emotional health (Sáenz-López, 2020).

As a final synthesis, it can be stated that the articulation among motor praxeology, emotions, and research methodology opens a promising horizon for both science and educational and sports practice. Understanding how internal logic configures affective experience, how roles and domains of motor action shape emotional well-being or discomfort, and how pedagogical design can redirect these processes makes it possible to conceive 21st-century motor education as a privileged setting for learning to feel, think, decide, and live together through motor conduct. The immediate challenge is to continue refining conceptual and methodological tools without losing sight of what ultimately gives meaning to this field of study: the living emotional experience of the people who play.

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