



# Body, Corpolatry<sup>1</sup> and Performativity in Physical Education

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## ABSTRACT

Cartesian dualism influenced all classical science, reducing the body view to the field of natural sciences. With the redemocratization of Brazil, there was a break with the "biologist" conceptions of the body, from the period of the military dictatorship, which valued performance, despite the fact that, currently, its influences are still observed in the Brazilian Physical Education imagination. Generally, the motivations for obtaining a "perfect body" (most of the times unattainable) appeal to emotions, fears of third parties' judgments and insecurities hidden in the subjects' unconscious, appropriating the common element and creating the promise capable of healing that pain: the consumption. This research aimed to reflect on the concept of body and performativity in Physical Education and its paradigm changes, in addition to dialoguing with other research that dealt with the perceptions that undergraduates, Physical Education teachers and their students have about the body. The results of several studies have shown that students prefer to take classes with teachers that they consider "muscular" and that there is, in fact, a demand for this stereotype. It is possible to conclude, based on the observed literature, that there is a close relationship between the judgment that is made of the knowledge of the Physical Education teacher with stereotypes of "ideal body", "trained", "athletic", "thin", "musculous" that the culture of performativity wants to impose. It is necessary to search for complexity in its incompleteness and uncertainty and to know the tensions that these subjects undertake to face the strategies of performativity.

**Keywords:** Performativity; Education; Body; Physical Education

## INTRODUCTION

The culture of performativity, theorized by Ball (2004, 2010, 2002, 2001, 2005, 2014), is characterized by making the subject the object of an evaluation in a scenario where the teaching practice becomes instrumentalized, performative. There is an aggravating factor in the question of performativity in the field of Physical Education since the teacher is "measured", "evaluated" by an aesthetic ideal, of "perfect body" and/or sports performance. The view of Physical Education undergraduates/teachers is also no different (Malysse, 2007; Goldenberg, 2007; Sabino, 2007; Rosa and Assis, 2013; Costa and Silva, 2014; Silva et al., 2009).

Is it essential for the Physical Education teacher to have a "muscular body", "thin body", "trained body" for a teaching practice consistent with his academic training? In order for your training to be carried out at the university, is there a requirement for a certain standard of body and/or sports performance? What is the perception that undergraduate Physical Education students/teachers have of the body of their students, colleagues and their own? And what is the perception of students about the body of their Physical Education teachers? Is there an "ideal body" for them to be pursued? If there is and when it is not achieved, what does that provide them with? What has been produced in the literature in this regard?

<sup>1</sup> In Portuguese "corpolatry" is "corpolatria", that is a neologism created to unite the word "body" to "idolatry" or its equivalent in Portuguese "corpo" and "idolatria". Therefore, we opted for the "corpolatria" translation for corpolatry.

I have been reflecting on these issues that have been discussed in the literature for a long time and that I have experienced in my daily life as a student, intern and, currently, a Physical Education teacher. On several occasions, I heard from students, colleagues and managers of institutions where I studied/worked speeches, about the Physical Education teacher, such as: "how is he a Physical Education teacher, fat like that?", "A swimming teacher has that knowing how to swim the four styles ", " if you don't know how to play ball, you can't teach soccer lessons ", " gained weight, teacher ". However, there are impossibilities and no guarantees in making predictions and interpretations, based only on our "worldview".

In this sense, the present research had as objective to reflect on the conception of body and performativity in Physical Education and its paradigm changes and dialoguing with other researches that dealt with the perceptions that undergraduates, Physical Education teachers and their students have about the body.

### **BODY AND CORPOLATRY**

The issue of corpulatrity, the cult of the body and/or the search for a "perfect body" is much debated in the field of Physical Education. Beauty standards are imposed and renewed every decade in our society, mainly by the media and, currently, by social networks. According to Freitas (2004), we are concerned with "losing belly", "increasing the biceps", "decreasing the nose" with plastic surgeries. For the author, it would be as if the parts of our body were outside of ourselves, and as the changes undergone by one of them were not, in fact, changes of the whole.

The current society has been producing the manifestation of what is aesthetic and, mainly, of what should be desired, exhibiting an extremely rigid pattern as to the ideal body and is not aware of the production of a collective symptom that circulates in all environments. Subjects related to diets, physical appearance, plastic surgery and physical exercise are everywhere, at school and parties (Bucarechi, 2003 apud Oliveira, 2012, p. 25).

This relentless search for the perfect body has made individuals indiscriminately use the available resources to reach this body perfection imposed by society, such as aesthetic treatments, diets and food supplements easily found on the internet, without the prescription of a nutritionist, the use excessive use of anabolic steroids, without a prescription or even medical follow-up. Such methods are used indiscriminately and cause serious health problems, often leading the subjects to death.

According to Vigarello (2006), beauty is part of several dialogues and discourses in modern times. The certainty that perfection is installed in the world changes the daily way of looking at the body. The body, not only physical, but psychic, sexual, social, is an agent of culture, according to Jaggar and Bordo (1997), and a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which central norms, hierarchies and even metaphysical commitments are inscribed. The body is not just a text of culture but a direct practical place of social control. "The body is appropriate, trained by culture, socially conceived, altered according to collectively established beliefs and ideals" (Queiroz, 2000, p. 19). This social control can be perceived in the way the body is shown in the media and social networks, in the constant publications of photos of "fitness models", artists, skinny actresses, with imaginary "perfect" bodies, inculcating that this is the standard of beauty to which anyone should conform.

The advertising discourse has a fundamental role in the propagation of this consumerist and neoliberal ideal of corpulatrity. Advertisements use discursive strategies to achieve commercial purposes with their target audience. The intention is to disclose the characteristics and qualities inherent to the product so that, thus, consumers make their choices according to their needs and / or desires, most of the times manufactured by advertising. The advertising discourse does not consist only of objective information about the products to be sold, but of a complex social communication process in resonance with the forces of the individuals' imaginary. Thus, in the face of so many similar products, the advertising discourse has the role of differentiating it. According to Sant'anna (2005), modern advertising has replaced the old refrain "the secret is the soul of the business", with the concept "advertising is the soul of the business" and, finally, with the more real theme: "advertising sells, educates and encourages progress". From offering images of well-being, advertising proposes lifestyles to individuals. In this sense, the invitation to instant happiness would be destined to make individuals forget the difficulties of their daily lives. For this, it is up to the advertising professional to choose which type of strategy he will use. Generally, the motivations for obtaining a "perfect body" (most of the times unattainable) appeal to emotions, fears of third parties' judgments and insecurities hidden in the subjects' unconscious, appropriating the common element and creating the promise capable of healing that pain: consumption.

### **BODY AND PERFORMATIVITY**

The more technical, biological, performance interpretations and study of the body tendencies are primarily due to the understanding of René Descartes (1637), in his Cartesian dualism that promoted the separation between body versus mind. Descartes removed the body from its socio-cultural dimension, in which these are historically forged to elaborate the concept of "body-machine". For the philosopher, the human body would be a great gear made up of a great amount of bones, muscles, nerves, arteries, veins, made by the hands of God. And that the mind (or spirit) would be the intellectual part that would inhabit and govern this inert body, leading it to true knowledge through reason: "I think, therefore I am". During the military dictatorship (1964-1985), such dualism limited Brazilian Physical Education to the prism of natural sciences. Physical Education was, at the time, the celebration of the "strong", of the powerful, of those who were aligned to a constituted order. It advocated alienating sport, obtaining better sports performances,

Olympic medals, university games, and encouraging a climate of political apathy to divert attention from the tortures, disappearances, and murders promoted by the military (Castellani Filho, 1988; Ghiraldelli Júnior, 2007; Castro, 2005).

Currently, this dualistic view is no longer in vogue in studies referring to body culture in Physical Education, which adopts an understanding of the body in its entirety: "I am my body! I exist, so I think" (Merleau-Ponty, 1999, p. 207). Morin (2005), in this perspective, points to a notion of complexity where the being and/or the body would not be simply physiological, biological, but also cultural, psychic and spiritual. "That man is a biological-sociocultural being and that social phenomenon are, at the same time, economic, cultural, psychological" (p. 177). That complexity should try to conceive and articulate identity and difference to all these dimensions, without unifying them in a reductionist view. However, such a reduction also created epistemological problems in Physical Education and Sports:

In Brazil, in some universities, Sports and Physical Education are classified as a "Health Science" or a "Sports Science", alongside Medicine, Physiotherapy and others. However, at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), for example, the undergraduate program in Physical Education and the Postgraduate Program in Exercise Science and Health (master's and doctorate) are linked to the Education and Humanities Center. Human or Health Science? They seek their space with the natural and empirical sciences, while the human and social sciences also invite them to walk together (Valladão et al., 2019, p. 9).

However, the complexity of Morin (2005) is closely related to a new conception of Physical Education - body culture. This emerges in the 1980s, and begins to think of the body as the expression of a culture historically forged and expressed by movements that become support for very particular social signs, in contrast to the simplifying and dualistic, biologist and technicist vision of the body as a set of joints, muscles and bones (Daolio, 2007; Darido, 2003; Medina, 2005; Soares et al., 1992; Marinho, 2005).

Physical Education currently has these particularities, this interdisciplinary (natural vs. human) duality that transitions between the biological and the sociocultural. That is why I share the concerns, efforts and concerns of the various authors mentioned above and others in combating scientism and traditional methods.

The 1980s were indeed a time of suppression and a partial break with hegemonic military thinking in favour of democratic reopening. However, Physical Education has not managed to break free from the neoliberal bonds that currently impose standards of body and performance on teachers. These problems can be observed in Rio de Janeiro, in a very particular way, by the forms of representations of the body and the searches for a type of "ideal body". Goldenberg (2007), states that a simple walk on the sands of Rio, on a sunny Sunday can turn into a rich ethnography of the body that causes a real explosion of meanings, revealing its diverse specificities. However, this cult of the body or corpolatry, a term preferred by Malysse (2007), can cause several problems for the subjects and, in particular, for Physical Education undergraduates and teachers, constantly evaluated by aesthetic standards. When talking about corpolatry, the frenzy of the search for the "perfect body", Malysse (2007) compares it to a religion, where its adherents who "work out", for example, would discriminate against those who do not "work out". The author highlights the need to look for good shape, thinness, which would allow a good presentation of the body to others and that there is a difference between the body that is seen and what one has, the second being a set of images/norms imposed by the media - the virtual body.

The "virtual" body presented by the media is a lying body, measured, calculated and artificially prepared before being translated into images and becoming a powerful message of corpolatry. These standard images are intended for all who see them and, through an incessant dialogue between what they see and what they are, individuals dissatisfied with their appearance (particularly women) are cordially invited to consider their body defective. Even though he is in perfect health, his body is not perfect "it must be corrected" by numerous self-transformation rituals, always following the advice of the image-norms broadcast by the media (Malysse, 2007, p. 93-94).

For Sabino (2007), this body pattern refers to the development of musculature, which the author calls muscularity (for men) and thinness (for women), that is, a low percentage of fat and a high percentage of mass muscle. He also argues that this need for acceptance and social ascension through the body, often leads subjects to abuse the excessive use of anabolic steroids, other hormones and products in search of "good shape". Oliveira et al. (2010), when investigating the discursive strategies present in twelve issues of the magazine "Boa Forma", from the year 2004, concluded that there are several messages of interventions for the transformation of the body to achieve an "aesthetic perfection" and that the magazine reinforces the notion of blaming women, in the face of socially constructed aesthetic standards phenomena.

The Physical Education teacher ends up being subject to this performative culture of corpolatry too, to present himself as a reference for his students, which is based on means of control, change, friction and judgments about professional performance. In this sense, Ball (2005) brings Lyotard's concept of performativity (1984), which is linked to the idea of transforming knowledge into merchandise, being measured through result indicators, generating mechanisms for comparing and judging professionals. It is the establishment of a new culture of competitive performance to produce new institutional profiles. It aims to produce profits in the social area, in addition to expanding it (Ball, 2004).

The research by Rosa and Assis (2013) illustrates well this performative culture established in Physical Education that the teacher to be good, competent, qualified must, above all, be at the ideal weight or have a certain sports performance. The authors interviewed 55 gymnasts in the northern and southern areas of Rio de Janeiro to get to know their opinions and social representations about the body for the Physical Education teacher. The study showed that students prefer to take classes with teachers they consider muscular

and that there is indeed a demand for this stereotype. This “struggle” generates high personal and psychological “costs”, a kind of schizophrenia suffered by teachers, according to Ball (2002). A constant conflict between everything that was learned during graduation, in teacher training courses, in contrast to, now, his teaching practice. The acceptance and identification with the critical and post-critical educational theories at the university, for example, in conflict with the neoliberal performance logic, of the market, of body aesthetics and performance closed in itself.

The school field is not that different. How many times have Physical Education teachers not had to hear what to teach content? What should your body look like? What should he know how to play, dance or fight?

In another study Silva et al. (2009) interviewed 103 undergraduate students in the Physical Education degree course, from different periods at a public university in Rio de Janeiro to get to know their views on the body. At the end of the study, they concluded that there is a vision of the body still marked by a “biologizing” trend, due to the historical construction of Physical Education, but that there were notes of changes in these concepts. This view of the body of the undergraduate student in Physical Education ends up being taken to his teaching practice at school.

Costa and Silva (2014), when interviewing 51 high school students, found that the subjects addressed by Physical Education teachers in their classes, are related to purely biological and aesthetic aspects. The authors also highlight the lack of other subjects related to the body, the lack of problematization and discussions that stimulate critical thinking in students. This aesthetic concern legitimises a discourse of power, of post-industrial societies, of those who control the judgment of what is correct and efficient (Ball, 2010).

Control that it is not in the teacher's hands, in the classroom or on the school's sports court. On the contrary, this is the basis for uncertainty, anxiety, the eternal questioning that whether your teaching practice will be “right”, “sufficient”, “satisfactory”, whether your body is within the required standard or not. Ball (2010) classifies this moment as the rise of “control societies” of self-modulation and self-deformation that will be continually changed, making performativity a system of terror (Ball, 2010).

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Cartesian dualism, which influenced all classical science, also reduced, for a long time, the view of the body to the field of natural sciences. Despite the rupture with the “biologist” conceptions of the body, which valued performance, after the country's re-democratization, we can still observe the influences of this period in the Brazilian Physical Education imaginary.

It remains evident in the theoretical discussions observed that there is a close relationship between the judgment that is made of the knowledge of the Physical Education teacher with a conception of “ideal body”, “trained”, “athletic”, “thin”, “muscular”. It is necessary to broaden and qualify the discussion about the body of undergraduates and Physical Education teachers, combating such stereotypes and the evaluations that the culture of performance wants to impose.

We conclude, therefore, that it is necessary to abandon the distant and neutral gaze, the anthropologist's usual departure from his “object” of study and immerse himself in the subjects' daily lives - undergraduate students and Physical Education teachers. To seek complexity in its incompleteness and uncertainty and to know the tensions that these subjects undertake to face the strategies of performativity.

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