

# Aging in the view of Physical Education professionals working at fitness centers: body and profession

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study is to understand how Physical Education professionals working at fitness centers see and deal with their own aging, as well as to debate possible relations between aging, the body and the labor market in fitness centers. Data were collected through *semi-structured interviews*. No longer matching the young and healthy model admired at fitness centers is negative for those professionals, who seek to use the knowledge acquired in the profession to cover up stereotypes associated with aging. They thus believe they increase their chances of remaining in the market.

**Keywords:** Fitness Centers. Teachers. Physical Education. Aging. Body.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

A body model linked to parameters based on physical activity plays an increasingly important role in current times (ORTEGA, 2010). Physical exercise takes on a central value in body building: it improves fitness, reduces body fat and exposes muscles (LUPTON, 2000).

In this current context, body practices along with fitness centers – a privileged environment for physical exercise – gain more space

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(FREITAS *et al.*, 2011; ROJAS, 2003; MARCELLINO, 2003; SASSATELLI, 1999). From 1970 on, fitness centers proliferated considerably, mainly associated with the search for improvement in body aesthetics (NOVAES, 2001). More recently, according to Crossley (2006), in addition to aspects related to appearance, fitness centers are a place to raise self-esteem and make friends. Another concept that is always present within these places is health, usually linked to quality of life (LIZ *et al.*, 2010; TOSCANO, 2001).

Given this situation, one of the main actors of the fitness center – the Physical Education professional – is seen as an influential figure in that environment where body issues arise (FREITAS *et al.*, 2011a). Their figures are usually associated with professionals who are young, healthy and exuberant in their physical aspect. According to Palma *et al.* (2007), the Physical Education professional working in fitness centers has to be a young person with fashionable athletic apparel, who needs to keep an athletic shape and be immune to health problems, since appearance and physical disposition must indicate a certain body ideal.

As to their career at fitness centers, studies show that aspects like youthfulness and appearance may be even more appreciated than experience and expertise to acquire prestige and stability (VILHENA *et al.*, 2012; PALMA, ASSIS, 2005; ANTUNES, 2003; COELHO FILHO, 2001; 1997). However, as far as we can see, only Coelho Filho (2005) and Lüdorf and Ortega (2013) investigated the influence of those aspects (youthfulness, appearance and especially aging) on Physical Education professionals' stability and career expectations in the fitness market. Therefore, a knowledge gap is observed, particularly with respect to better understanding the work of Physical Education professionals at fitness centers as they age.

We underscore the importance of studying issues related to the body and the appearance of Physical Education professionals working in fitness centers, for example, those associated with their aging, mainly due to: 1) their importance and their influence in that environment; 2) appreciation of the body's surface appearance

within those institutions; 3) the growing representativeness of fitness centers as socialization spaces in contemporary society. Thus, production and dissemination of scientific knowledge on the subject can contribute to extend the debates, so far incipient, both in academia and among the general population.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate how Physical Education professionals working in fitness centers see and deal with aging, and to discuss possible links with aging, the body and the labor market in fitness centers.

## **2 METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES**

This research is qualitative because it seeks to understand not only the phenomenon itself, but mainly its meanings in a specific social context – valuing the process rather than just the result (TURATO, 2005).

Under such concept of research, the selection of subjects who will compose the research corpus is a key point in its construction. Duarte (2002, p. 141) states that “[...] the description and delimitation of the base population, that is, the subjects to be interviewed as well as the degree to which they represent the social group under study are a problem to be immediately faced [...]”. Thus, the survey was conducted under the guidelines of Gaskell (2003) to expand the diversity of opinions, and those of Bauer and Aarts (2003), as it tries to understand the variety of representations of people in their experiential world.

The criteria considered for the selection of professionals were: holding a degree in Physical Education and working in the fitness market for at least ten years. The time is justified by the understanding that experiences over years of work might favor deeper reflections and/or wealth of discourse.

Importantly, it was difficult to find subjects who met the criteria of working time at fitness centers. In addition, some resistance to

participate was detected because it is a study on a sensitive issue such as aging – a fact also noted by Goldenberg (2008) and Lüdorf and Ortega (2013). Thus, the selection of subjects was performed primarily out of convenience. By and large, respondents worked at one or more large and medium-size fitness centers located in southern Rio de Janeiro; importantly, they also usually worked in different fitness centers as bodybuilding instructors, with localized gymnastics (and variations) or as personal trainers.

The number of interviews was determined during the study, based on the depth and “originality” of the data contained in each of them (DUARTE, 2002). We conducted 12 interviews with Physical Education professionals, ten men and two women aged 35-61, who had graduated 10-38 years before, as can be seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Respondents' profile

<b>Physical Education professionals*</b>	<b>Year of graduation</b>	<b>Experience working at fitness centers (years)</b>	<b>Age</b>
W2	2001	10	40
W22	1980	29	53
M2	1987	23	45
M5	1989	13	44
M10	1973	31	61
M12	1982	28	52
M13	1988	23	54
M14	1982	28	50
M16	1989	22	42
M17	1993	17	35
M18	1987	12	45
M20	1988	23	47

\* M: men; W: women

Source: Authors

Technique triangulation is desirable in this type of research in order to improve validity by obtaining data from different sources (SILVERMAN, 2005; LÜDORF, 2004). Thus, in addition to interviews based on a semi-structured script of questions,<sup>1</sup> we observed the environment at fitness centers. Writing down facts and aspects observed in the field diary can assist with interpretations (FONTANELLA *et al.*, 2006; DUARTE, 2002). Data collected were analyzed based on content analysis proposed by Turato (2003) when he emphasized the need for answers to be grouped around broader themes, respecting repetition and relevance criteria. The central themes generated, which will guide the presentation of the data were: views on aging (physical degradation; knowledge and experience); body, professional competence and work; body care; satisfaction at work.

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Public Health Studies at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro – IESC/UFRJ (Process No. 52/2008, Report No. 04/2009).

### 3 PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF DATA

With respect to aging, we detected two processes. The first one is related to what we call “physical degradation”:

Man, I'll tell you this: in physical terms, it's not good at all. I don't know, you feel the degeneration of your body compared to what it used to be. You used to be in perfect shape and now you feel shoulder pain, lower back pain, you feel things that hinder you in daily life. (M2)

It's you getting full [...] getting wrinkled, suddenly a little “arthrosis” here or there, or some illness

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<sup>1</sup>The script for the interviews was previously validated by five PhDs specialized in the area, as well as by some pilot interviews. It included the following questions: 1. How is your career as a Physical Education professional active in fitness centers? 2. Do you notice any difference between the early times of your professional practice and now? 3. What does age mean for you? 4. Do you have any concern about your aging? 5. How does aging relate to your professional life? 6. How do you feel about your body and your profession over the years? 7. Do you do anything about your aging process?

you get for any excess you have done in the past, you know? And that's getting older for me. (M5)

Aging as a person means that I can't manage some daily skills... just as we see some students with certain difficulties, to sit, stand, lie down, I think that's aging for me. Obviously, there is aesthetics, I won't deny it, I'm a woman and we are much more demanded in aesthetics, but I think the worst is that your body isn't working, right? It's trying to get up, lie down, walk, that's what I think it's one of the things that worry me a lot. (W2)

We get into an upward curve until we're 24, 25 [...], the major anabolism and suddenly reactions begin to be catabolic, and you start to go down the ladder. (M13)

The statements show aging associated with elements considered negative: decline of biological functions, which can help reduce dexterity and/or increase difficulty in performing tasks; pains, diseases and negative changes in appearance.

The relationship between the performance of the Physical Education professional in the environment of fitness centers and a possible reduction in physical capacity over time must be considered, since their work often requires high physical effort. Espírito-Santo and Mourão (2006), for instance, note that fitness work requires that Physical Education professionals be in great shape because in many cases, besides conducting the session, it is important to perform it with the class. Similarly, Palma and Assis (2005) emphasize the importance of a proper physical conditioning for Physical Education professionals working in fitness centers, and warn about the possibility that such a requirement induces them to use substances that improve performance.

A point that stood out during data collection for this study and contributes to the argument based on loss of physical strength experienced by professionals in that market was the limited time available for scheduling interviews. Indeed, they accumulate work in schools, clubs or different fitness centers. Labor activity related

to the different work areas that allow for better pay, to fatigue caused by the displacement between them, irregular hours – may all have consequences for the body.

The second process detected that is linked to aging is related to knowledge and experience:

I count on it (professional experience), on knowing how to deal with certain situations with which sometimes professionals who graduated (recently) will not be able to deal; they might be technically better than me, but they will not know how to deal with that situation, because life is made of improvisation, right? Sooner or later you'll have to deal with a situation you haven't learned about in a course or in any college, you learn it from life. So I think it is more about that, you know? Experience in life and in your profession. (M5)

You get safer for being more mature and having experienced many situations, so it gives you more... more... some confidence... and ... and I think that's it: more knowledge, right? Because you too, whether you like it or not, it's not because of graduations or [...] no, it's because it's daily knowledge; knowledge about dealing with people, right? Working with others [...] I think it's life learning, it's not only specific of our career; it's not, because I feel like that with my friends, in the street, I listen more. (M14)

More in the beginning, in the beginning I too used to get the dosage of classes wrong, too strong, too weak, and today I get it right a lot more often than (before); we are never perfect, but today I make virtually very few mistakes. (M20)

The years provided respondent 5 with more experience to deal with unforeseen situations while recognizing the technical possibilities of the youngest professional. Respondent 14 says that aging has given her experiential knowledge that favors more confidence and maturity to deal with people, while respondent 20

points professional skills compared to the beginning of her career, coupled with the intensity of work.

In a sense, the statements lead us to what Coelho Filho (1997) observes: aging will be regarded as positive if life experience promotes changes in the person and in the practice of gymnastics professionals at fitness centers. Nevertheless, although professionals interviewed appreciate certain aspects related to aging, previous studies point to a reality where that “experience” may not be crucial. Vilhena *et al.* (2012) underscore that active professionals’ entering and remaining in the fitness center market are associated with their ability to fit the standard body shape – and that ability (or willingness) is understood as a symbol of competence.

The mistaken association between appearance and competence present in common sense is also a concern by professionals, as exemplified in the following excerpt:

There is prejudice with respect to age and the body; fat teachers are not hired [...]. So sometimes prejudice comes... . Look at people showing it to society, the customer is prejudiced, so if the gym’s manager buys that, he is indirectly prejudiced: “No, I will please the customer, I’ll hire the young guy in good shape to please customers” (M18)

In addition, customers’ alleged preference for younger professionals could also contribute to that process:

In my case at the gym, of course it is much better for the gym to hire a 20-year-old newly graduated professional, for a number of reasons: one is appearance... and people have more disposition when they are young, they are more willing to do things than when they’re 30, 40 and have worked longer, then you’re not in the mood... not only physically but moneywise; and gym customers say they prefer young teachers because no one will want a 40, 50-year-old a bodybuilding room, teaching in a fitness room, of course they will prefer a younger person, male or female. (M16)



I try to see myself within 15 years, still teaching, at 60, if I'm going to be accepted by customers, not the older ones, because those will stay with me forever, but a new student coming to the gym and seeing an older man teaching: "I won't go with that old guy there, I'll go with the kid there, it will be better" (student's thinking when choosing teacher). I don't know how that comparison will be, looking at my face while at the same time in terms of, of... if I'll have the same disposition; I really like my job, but I don't know how I will be in 10 (years), 15 (years). How is my mind going to be? [...] I try to keep a certain attitude, a certain... that imposes a certain respect on students, "Gee, that guy's kind of old, but he is in good shape!"

Palma and Assis (2005) state that for Physical Education professionals working in fitness, the body is a product in market relations, contributing as a technical and physical resource. Furthermore, in the market for major fitness centers in Rio de Janeiro, youth associated with competence seems to guarantee prestige and stability to gymnastic professionals, rather than experience and expertise (COELHO FILHO, 2001; 2005). According to respondents, both fitness centers (management) and customers themselves show preference for younger professionals. Driven by the pursuit of financial stability and career aspirations, professionals that recently arrived to the context of fitness centers have even more physical disposition and can take unpleasant situations, but they stand out mainly for reasons related to appearance.

When thinking fitness centers as businesses, as they are indeed (FURTADO, 2007), recently graduated professionals usually enter the labor market as cheaper labor. According to Coelho Filho (2005), respondents express some uncertainty as to their career development with aging, primarily because they are moving away from the stereotypical profile of Physical Education professionals working at fitness centers, "young and in good shape". Because of the loss of strength caused by aging, some of those professionals seem to get away from working at the fitness centers market (especially large ones) over the years.

Faced with those issues, aging seems to be a counterproductive aspect in the career of Physical Education professionals in the fitness center market. Thus, in an attempt to maintain health, they report care linked to aging:

I'll hardly grow old, because I'm always moving, doing my tracks, I do my basic exercise, easier, I don't want to be strong, muscular, right? But I do enough so I can move, for articulations to move, for my muscles to move, my blood to irrigate, you know? (H5)

You start getting down the ladder, and what we can do to reverse entropy, which is not only our entropy, it's like the universe itself, we must do through physical activity, nutrition, sleep and..., all mechanisms we have to maintain and reverse it. [...] I eat well, I drink water and all the other things that we know as teachers, and have to be done. I drink beer too, I drink wine, I'm no saint, you know? But not every day, and I always eat well, I try to eat every three hours, lots of fruit, vegetable and such [...]. So I know how to do my things the best way. (M13)

I eat well, I have my vitamins that I take, the vitamins I make at the blender, no buying, I put my vegetables, orange, I do my crazy things there and try to eat everything good, a bit of everything, and also let it go from time to time, I'm free to eat my fried shrimp, fried little things, sweets, things I like, nothing exaggerated, nothing exaggerated, all balanced; I try to sleep well, I try to wake up, I always wake at the same time, always sleep at the same time [...]; playing a sport, I do my (localized gymnastics). (H20)

Silva and Lüdorf (2012) found Physical Education graduates working in different areas concerned about keeping their bodies functioning, since it would be important to perform certain social roles related to their profession. Therefore, through balanced practice of certain care linked to physical exercise, food and daily regular hours of sleep, respondents seek to fight these aspects related to "physical degradation". To this end, therefore, Physical Education

professionals active in fitness centers end up incorporating some of the body practices that they strongly advocate for the customers of those institutions.

Lupton (2000) argues that health is seen as a goal to be achieved through effort and dedication, and having physical activity as a core value. For Ortega (2010), the man now seen as healthy develops a number of physical and aesthetic concerns (and therefore practices/habits). The idea of "health self-management", also used by the author, helps to understand such behavior seen in respondents, who take responsibility for improving and maintaining their own health. It is worth questioning is to what extent these "habits" can by themselves ensure good health and, in addition, postpone or even avoid, as professionals believe, the body features resulting from aging and seen as negative.

Even though the literature and the findings in this study report some resistance and some difficulties related to aging pervading careers and the practice of Physical Education professionals working in fitness centers, a considerable level of satisfaction with the profession emerged in speeches, even decades after they graduated:

Financially, it's not a profession that is worth for me; it's worth it for the feedback, for my health that I've learned to control, the issue of exercise, of diet, of way of life you have. (M12)

I don't live only out of Physical Education, but I live Physical Education very much, because I like it a lot, so much that after getting old, that is, with more... more age I embraced it again (the profession). (M13)

I enjoy working at the gym too, because I think it's cool, I consider it a nice environment, the results you get, it's nice... [...] So I think that's cool, you have a feedback on it, see people, teach things that... that... that will help her feel better, not at the gym, but for her life [...]. (M14)

When I graduated, I saw right away that it was localized gymnastics, that would be the gym. I've worked a little with bodybuilding, but I like the

room (localized gymnastics class), I like the room, the crowd, music, rhythm. [...] I like my job a lot. (M20)

I now really like what I do very much, I love it. (W2)

Despite the apparent contradiction and interfering aspects that can change Physical Education professional's experience in career and practice as they age, fitness centers are one of the main places for them to work (ESPÍRITO-SANTO; MOURÃO, 2006). Just as there are indications that might support the argument of Palma *et al.* (2007) about "early retirement" by those professionals, there seem to be certain niche markets for those who have had longer careers, for example, management positions or personal trainer jobs (LÜDORF; ORTEGA, 2013).

Even though time can be seen as unfavorable to the work of Physical Education professionals in fitness centers, those spaces still seem to serve those who maintain that market after years or decades. Professional satisfaction expressed by respondents does not cover the financial aspect, which emerges as yet another obstacle in that area of work. On the other hand, that satisfaction is provided mainly because of a pleasant work environment, interpersonal relationships and for dealing with healthy habits. Despite the difficulties related to the loss of physical shape and body stereotypes, some of those professionals are sure of the profession they have chosen. There was no specific question in the script that encouraged respondents to address this issue; on the contrary, satisfaction with work emerged spontaneously in their speeches, which further underscores the relevance of its content.

#### **4 CONCLUSION**

In general, for respondents, aging means decline in aspects such as cardiovascular health, strength and disposition, accompanied by an accumulation of experience, knowledge of life and the profession. Fatigue related to physical effort and long working hours in search of better pay often discourages and alienates professionals from the

market as they age. In order to minimize subjective damage linked to the loss of professional space, investment was found in several forms of body care, in the opinion of respondents, to minimize the effects of aging.

No longer representing the young, healthy and cheerful model so appreciated and socially idealized at fitness centers is a negative point for professionals interviewed. Management favors younger and lower-paid professionals. The gradual loss of the body model idealized for Physical Education professionals working at fitness centers appears to affect their relationship with customers, especially younger ones, since they are most vulnerable to elect models. Therefore, as described by Coelho Filho (2005), Physical Education professionals working in fitness centers, when projecting that they work for the customers of those institutions as distorting mirrors, since it does not reflect the subject but an ideal (and normative) model, are aware that requirements of body aesthetics and physical performance progressively hamper their possibilities to growth in that labor market (as they age).

Although they show difficulties associated with aging in fitness centers, it was possible to find professionals convinced of their choice to work in that market, specially because they are committed and experiencing a particular active lifestyle linked to health the profession knowledge.

Given the distinct roles faced by Physical Education professionals in fitness centers (bodybuilding, collective exercise modalities, personal trainer etc.), we suggest the possibility of future studies investigating the peculiarities related to aging even in their different assignments within those institutions.

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