

How body awareness is perceived by undergraduate students of Physical Education: fragmented or integrated?

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was twofold: i) to learn about and compare how senior and junior Physical Education undergraduate students perceive body awareness; and ii) to investigate how they deal with the body when working in that field. Data was collected via a questionnaire applied to 103 Physical Education undergraduates, and by documental analyses. Results show that the body is predominantly perceived by juniors under the technical-biological concept, and by seniors under the more integrated outlook. Professional practice would be associated to tutoring based on health, aesthetics and technical guidelines.

Keywords: Body. Physical Education. Teacher training.

1 INTRODUCTION

Discussing the representations of the body within the scope of Physical Education is a difficult task, as building this field is complex and characterised by different discourses and practices related to body culture. (BRACHT, 1999; SOARES

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et al., 1992; RESENDE; SOARES, 1996; SOARES, 2004)

Probable differences associated with the consensus on what the body means for individuals that work in the field of Physical Education ensue, first and foremost, from the premise whereby such fact derives from distinct socioeconomic and political periods. Albeit it is possible to verify through classic authors certain body-related discourses, it should be noted that one discourse did and still does not replace another linearly, but rather, as the dynamic coexistence of body-related concepts. According to Daolio (1998), this was a positive aspect as it broadened the field of action and thinking about body-related issues in Physical Education.

Hence, it is assumed that discourses and practices related to the body culture by actors involved in Physical Education, such as the undergraduate students herein addressed, are in part a reflex of the past and of the records, i.e. the critical manner of studying and interpreting the field's history (FERREIRA, 2004). Exemplarily, in Daolio's (1995) study of the representations of Physical Education school teachers about the body, he observed that their way of teaching focuses almost exclusively on physical skills derived from the biological understanding of the body, i.e. as if it preceded culture. On the other hand, in relation to Physical Education university professors, Lüdorf (2003) also identified some evidence that the body is perceived predominantly for its technical or biological aspects, sharing some of the cultural concepts related to the body.

Oliveira and Vaz (2004) think it is important to unite theory and history in order to foster the continuous exercising of criticism. Consequently, it seems that critically questioning and rethinking body-related concepts within this field is mandatory. Therefore, the purpose of this study is twofold: i) to learn about, study and compare how junior and senior undergraduate students of a public university Physical Education graduation course perceive body awareness; and ii) deal with the body when working in that field.

The discussion about issues related both to the body and to Physical Education is conducive to assessing if there are any changes on how undergraduates students perceive the body while attending the course, and if technical advancements in that field affect their education, and consequently, on how they will conceive their pedagogical work. Furthermore, this study intends to be a tool to help foster the teacher's rethinking his or her current practices. It is fundamental to assess if the Physical Education instructor is connected to social reality as preconised by Daolio (1995).

2 NOTES ON THEORY

Over its history, Physical Education has been affected by different significant influencing factors that are noted herein. According to Soares (2004), the medical-hygienist mindset was an important influence in the nineteenth century and early¹ twentieth century. Physical Education would be the perfect synthesis of education and health, helping to form a productive, robust and healthy individual that was needed to build Brazilian society (BRACHT, 1999).

According to Ghiraldelli Jr. (1992), the close association between Physical Education and militarism, which culminated between 1930 and 1945, was a factor that greatly helped to build disciplined and strong bodies, the purpose of which was to align them to the production process or the nationalistic policy that ensued from the Dictatorship regime of that time; this perspective was supported by the mindset of the medical-scientific body (BRACHT, 1999).

Two other sources of significant influence within the Physical Education context are the Competition-Oriented and the Sports-Oriented approach, mainly after 1964 (GHIRALDELLI JR., 1992), when sports became firmly established as a component of body culture (SOARES et al.,

¹ Ghiraldelli Jr. (1992), didactically, considers that the Hygienist trend lasted until 1930.

1992). Daolio (1995), exemplarily, verified that instructors primarily used their sports-related techniques to work with their students' bodies. According to Bracht (1999), this approach of Physical Education focused on technique and performance in order to foster a body policy based on its work capacity, individual and social productivity.

In the '80s, and even more so in the '90s, Physical Education embodied a series of discourses of the human and social study fields, thus strengthening the establishment of a more critical or progressive approach in relation to the body and Physical Education itself. Soares et al. (1992) affirm that this innovative phenomenon started with the psychometrics approach that used movement as a means of education.

It should be also noted this association between Physical Education and the cult of the body phenomenon, especially the proliferation of gyms and fitness centres in the late '80s (NOVAES, 2001). Darido and Rangel (2005) support that the concern with the current appearance of the "healthy" body has assumptions and purposes similar to the biological-hygienist model, with a renewed nature. Hence, body work in the light of health, aesthetics or life quality, hegemonically based on biological sciences, becomes another significant influence to the Physical Education context, often used as an intervention justification.

These influences, briefly addressed, form Physical Education's contemporary body-related concepts and can help interpret the empiric findings of this study, as presented herein.

3 METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

This investigation is based on some of the features of qualitative research, e.g. trying to understand a specific reality and detaining interpretative nature, without, however, intending to be considered exclusive or classical. Alves-

Mazzotti and Gewandsznajder (1999) understand that the research can be placed within a qualitative *continuum*, where it is important to establish coherence for the issues being addressed, the methodology used and the theoretical framework.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) support that associating methods in order to study and understand this phenomenon is a strategy that provides rigour, comprehensiveness and investigation. In face of the objectives of this study, the main technique preferred was the application of a questionnaire and documental analysis, especially the syllabus² and lesson plans.

The questionnaire was used because it enables a greater number of respondents; also, according to Goldenberg (1998), subjects feel more at ease to express their opinions. The questionnaire included six open-end questions³ to elicit spontaneous information, conducive to interpretative analysis. This instrument was previously validated by experts, where a pilot-study was carried out to verify if the questions were aligned to the goal of the study, as preconised by Janesick (1994).

Data was collected by handing the questionnaire to 103 undergraduate students during the first semester of 2007, where 56 were juniors⁴ and 47 seniors⁵ from a Physical Education graduate course of a public university in Rio de Janeiro. The questionnaires were handed out in the classroom, duly authorised previously by the professor(s) of each class;

² Syllabuses included course description, objectives, content, methodology, evaluation and references.

³ The questions were the following: 1) When the word "body" is mentioned, what are the first six words that come to your mind? 2) How would you define the body? 3) How does Physical Education deal with the body? 4) What should be the Physical Education instructor's primary concern when working with his/her students? 5) Do you think that the Physical Education instructor interferes on how his/her students' are or should be aware of the body? How? 6) What aspects of your body do you value most? Do you think that this aspect would help your professional life in Physical Education? Why?

⁴ The questionnaire was intentionally given at the start of the first semester, especially in relation to juniors, as the intention was to learn what they thought before they were influenced by the subjects they were learning.

⁵ Senior students were part of the study; despite the fact that theoretically the eighth period is the last, some students take shorter or longer to graduate.

they were completed by all the students at the same time and monitored by the researchers, where they were not allowed to share information. The questionnaires were completed only by students that agreed to take part in the study, according to ethical guidelines that govern this type of work.

Data was analysed based on the answers in order to identify the types of categories. This analysis is not a merely mechanical process as it depends on theoretical knowledge and the perception of researcher(s) (GASKELL, 2003). At first, the answers were grouped under broad-scope themes based on repetition and criterion of relevance (TURATO, 2003). Categories were not defined a priori, but rather, were created according to the meaning they were given, in this case to the body, to Physical Education and to how the instructor interferes. Then, data was interpreted in the light of the theoretical reference at hand. Alves-Mazzotti and Gewandsznajder (1999) support that adopting a conceptual framework prior to data collection is useful and does not hinder other theoretical categories from being generated from data. Under this analysis process, categories were refined and renamed where needed until a “final” result was obtained.

Data analysis was carried out together with data obtained from the questionnaires, where guidelines by Alves-Mazzotti e Gewandsznajder (1999) were applied, which purport the importance of knowing under which context the documents were created and their purpose. The next step was to carry out the critical analysis of the syllabus for the course at hand, the lesson plans and to recover the institution’s historic information in order to contextualise and support data understanding.

4 SEARCHING FOR FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

In particular, three questions were analysed⁶, which give subsidies for the discussion about what would define the body and how it would relate to the practice of pedagogy from the perception of Physical Education students. Findings are presented in Table 1 that shows core categories and the frequency of⁷ answers, as an illustration.

| Junior Undergraduates Students | Senior Undergraduate Students |
|---|---|
| Body Awareness | |
| Stand-Alone Body (31) | Stand-Alone Body (18) |
| Interactive Body (9) | Interactive Social Body (13) |
| Interactive Social Body (8) | Interactive Body (3) |
| How Physical Education deals with the body | |
| Health and Life Quality (29) | Health and Life Quality (9) |
| Physical aptitude related to motor skills (11) | Physical aptitude related to motor skills (6) Corporeality (6) |
| Aesthetics (9) | Aesthetics (5) |
| How Physical Education instructors interfere in their students' body awareness | |
| Guidance (33) | Guidance (15) |
| Modelling (10) | Modelling (8) |
| Pedagogical (1) | Pedagogical (7) |

Table 1: Comparative analysis of junior and senior Physical Education undergraduate students.

Data show that the 'stand-alone' body awareness was predominant, where it was mentioned thirty times by junior undergraduate students. The 'stand-alone' body criterion

⁶ Analysed questions were primarily 2, 3 and 5, where the remaining ones were used to complement the understanding of the answers given to the former.

⁷ Figures in brackets represent the number of time each category was mentioned in the answers given by undergraduate students. It should be noted that in some cases, one single answer can stand for more than just one category.

emerged from the following definitions of body: “the object that enables me to perform activities”; “a group of cells and organs”; “a machine that needs to be honed in order to work well”; “an instrument that needs to be well cared for and preserved”; in other words, the body was perceived as matter, structure, vehicle or as a machine. These findings gave margin to calling this category as the ‘stand-alone body’, based on Le Breton (2003) that uses the body’s alter ego (the other self) to refer to the body, which is considered a mere support for the individual; a dissociated object of the human being; a structure that can be modified with parts that can be replaced.

The second most-mentioned category by juniors was the ‘interactive body’, created from the following examples: “the grouping of bones, articulations, organs and muscles that is balanced with the mind”; “the combination of what we are internally and externally, matter and spirit”; “the perfect combination of the physical, mental and emotional aspects”.

Hence, the body was characterised as the union or integration between the physical and spiritual, or physical and cognitive. Despite showing that there is an apparent association that led to using the term ‘interactive body’, this body awareness ensues from the historical body-soul dualism. Romero (2005, p. 37) states that: “It is upon the body-soul dualism that civilisation is created and establishes divisions, which are clearly present in today’s Physical Education.”

Another category that stood out in the analysis was called the ‘interactive-social body’, where it was identified by quotations such as: “the body is to interfere with the environment. It is a means of interacting with life”; “through the body one can express oneself, perform movements and skills”; “it is a means of expression through which I can communicate with other people”. Under this concept, it seems that the body is perceived as a means of social interaction, shown as a means of communication, expression, and direct contact with the world. In this category, the body is perceived

as a sociocultural construction, as supported by Soares (1999), Daolio (2001) and Goellner (2005).

The concept of the ‘stand-alone body’ is predominant among juniors and seniors. This data is similar to what Hunger and Souza Neto (2002) observed, where the notion of “fragmented” body prevails among Physical Education undergraduate students and experts, albeit a few reports on the integrated perspective. It should be noted that the syllabus for this course is not different from the syllabus of other courses in the same field. There was a large number of biological science subjects and their associated specialisations (Anatomy, Human Physiology, Exercise Physiology, Exercise Biochemistry, Kinesiology, Biomechanics, etc.), which helped to foster and strengthen the fragmented discourse of a medical-oriented science, hindering the reach of the integrated body perspective (SILVA, 1998).

However, it was noted that among seniors the ‘interactive-social body’ approach was more prominent, despite the higher rate of the ‘stand-alone body’ concept. Based on these findings, it seems that the way undergraduate students perceive the body underwent a significant change, i.e. from an eminently technical and/or biological matrix, which would lead to dealing with the body by adopting a somewhat fragmented notion of the body to the matrix that embraces the historical-cultural process, as aspired to by Daolio (1995) and Soares (2003). This result could be due to the influence of the pedagogical nature of subjects in the senior’s syllabus, i.e. Education Sociology, Education Pedagogy, Special Didactics and Teaching (supervised training).

When asked how Physical Education deals with the body, the most-mentioned category by juniors was ‘fostering health and life quality’, mentioned 29 times, as in “working and maintaining good functioning”; “taking care of your health and well-being”; “exercising to prevent illnesses”; “preparing the body to be healthy”. This category is supported by traditional discourses that associate Physical Education

with good health, where doing a physical activity leads to improved physical and mental conditioning, rendering the body more functional and capable, and also helping to reach a better life quality.

This biology-oriented result ratifies the affirmative by Resende and Soares (1996) that many professionals believe that the role of Physical Education is to foster and maintain good health. The ingrained idea that exercising leads to good health and life quality is predominant in texts that address the issue. According to Warburton et al. (2006), exercising regularly could help in the primary and secondary prevention of many illnesses and to life quality. However, some researchers (PALMA, 2001; PALMA et al., 2003; MIRA, 2003) have questioned the notion of causality between exercising and health, in part because the very concept of health has been debated considering the different world-views and perspectives of differentiated analyses. Understanding health as the absence of illness can be simplifying a very complex phenomenon. It is also necessary to think about correlated concepts, such as sedentarism, which in Fraga's (2006) opinion can give rise to contradictions, where depending on which criterion is applied, the individual (or studied group) will be considered sedentary or active.

Likewise, the notion that exercising regularly leads to improved life quality needs to be considered more carefully. Generally speaking, when this condition is accepted the functional aspects of the body are taken into account (WARBURTON et al., 2006). However, life quality can be understood based on an individual perspective that considers historical, cultural, social and economic aspects, or yet, a collective perspective in relation to minimum and universal material levels, i.e. diet, access to public sewage system and fresh water, housing, education, work, health, recreation, etc. (MINAYO et al., 2000).

The second most outstanding category was ‘physical aptitude’ that is related to motor skills⁸. It was mentioned 11 times and can be observed in the following examples: “providing greater capacity to the individual”; “by movements and fitness”; “in the physical area, as we do a lot of exercising”. The improvement of physical and sports movement- and exercise-oriented practices are extolled. This finding is similar to Jesus’ (2005), who identified that the notion of instructor-athlete and sports coach is notably latent among undergraduate students.

However, the technical-biological trend on how Physical Education deals with the body was weaker among seniors. Albeit it is presented as a category associated with physical aptitude related to motor skills, the ‘corporality’ category arises with equal strength, defined by phrases such as “Teaches how to interact with the environment; “Helps to improve body expression”; “Physical Education gives us the means whereby our body performs in the environment. We think about aesthetics, corporality and psychomotility, to mention but a few aspects”. Within this context, it can also be noted that there is some dispute between the two outlooks, i.e. the body perceived as dissociated to the individual, characterised as a performance tool (having a body), and the Human Being as a body (SANTIN, 2001).

In this case there seems to be another indication of change on how undergraduate students perceive the body, probably ensuing from their learning process. The fact that the technical-biological perspective decreased simultaneously with the advent of corporality could be related to theoretical knowledge provided by the subjects in the syllabus. It was noted that students of this specific course could choose to specialise on two subjects from the syllabus, e.g. Sports or

⁸ In that physical aptitude can be related to health based on the improvement of the aerobic condition, strength levels, muscular resistance, body composition and flexibility (biological viewpoint of health), Caspersen et al. (1985) also support that physical aptitude can be associated to a series of attributes that individuals should have in place in order to perform certain motor-related tasks or athletic skills.

Recreation and Leisure. The assessment of subjects taught revealed that although the mandatory subjects related to the first more intensive study of Sports had an essentially technical nature (Ex.: Basketball, Soccer, Tennis, Judo, Artistic Gymnastics, etc.), in that it was a Bachelor's course, students had subjects typical of those specialties, i.e. Education Sociology, Education Psychology, Physical Education Didactics, to mention but a few. Furthermore, the syllabus includes subjects related to School Physical Education, e.g. School Gymnastics Theory and Practice, School Physical Education and Psychomotility Evaluation. A more comprehensive assessment of references recommended by the syllabus shows the presence of specific school-related contents, such as spearhead pedagogical trends, as well as theoretical body-related associations within a sociocultural perspective.

The body is mentioned in discussions related to this and other subjects, and also lends its name to a few, e.g. Introduction to the Study of Corporality, Study of Body Parameters and Body Anthropology. Upon studying the institution's syllabus it was possible to identify the significant influence of discourses, and not just technical-biological ones that are studied by the undergraduate students at hand; it seems to have influenced body awareness as perceived by seniors.

To the extent whereby this fact can be verified, seems to be a particularity of the institution under study, given that Hunger and Souza Neto (2002) identified that in Physical Education graduate courses the subjects are fragmented and lack work applicability, where a framework of conceptual knowledge of the body is always the rule, with a preponderance of biological sciences comprising the syllabus, a finding also endorsed by Daolio (2001).

When questioned about the interference of the Physical Education instructor in relation to their students' body awareness, they were unanimous in confirming that the

interference is basically in terms of ‘guidance’, which is a category represented in phrases such as: “because it raises the awareness to the fact that each person has their limit”; “giving examples, such as, if the instructor tells students to jog, he or she will also jog”; “the instructor must know how to transmit to the students the notion that the body is a machine that has to be well cared for in order to perform optimally”; “showing the necessary limits for the body’s good performance”. From these examples, it was noted that undergraduate students are concerned about the imminent intervention via the transmission of technical and functional aspects related to health, aesthetics or technical-sports improvement, without intending to generate critical thinking. Under this perception, the role of the Physical Education instructor is reduced to a giver of information. According to Paulo Freire (2004, p. 37): “[...] transforming the learning experience into mere technical training is to diminish the most fundamental human nature of teaching: its educational nature.”

Findings herein are clearly aligned to what Daolio points out: “When dealing directly with the student’s body, the instructor interferes with how they represent their own body and their body awareness. Consequently, he or she interferes with the very culture that supports these representations.” (DAOLIO, 1995, p. 96)

To a lesser extent, the second most-mentioned category by both juniors and seniors, the ‘modelling’ one, is characterised by how the Physical Education instructor interferes, i.e. “according to what he or she teachers, values and established priorities”; “how he or she thinks, expresses himself or herself and behaves”; “according to the instructor’s own fitness that often times will be a role model for the student”. This category comprises the importance of the instructor’s physical appearance, beliefs, habits and different behaviour. In this case, it seems to reflect to a certain point the demands made by society, where body and health models are exalted, which are reflected on the Physical Education professional that deals directly with the body (LÜDORF,

2004). According to Freire et al. (2002), the stereotyped image and physical skills are believed to be the right credentials for a competent professional intervention.

In particular, for senior undergraduate students, the pedagogical category was evident in phrases such as “stimulating body- and emotion-related feeling through physical activities; “providing a relationship between the body and different materials, other bodies and the environment”; “he or she can interfere by developing activities that challenge the students’ motility and that stimulate new movements when teaching children”. In corroboration to data presented herein so far, it shows that the syllabus of undergraduate courses, essentially in relation to the subjects of the seniors, exerted significant influence on how Physical Education interferes with students’ body awareness. However, the pedagogical aspect seems to be associated to the psychomotor nature of body awareness, which becomes clear when analysing the references that are part of the subjects⁹.

If the relevance of the ‘pedagogical’ category is worthy of note, it could be considered to a certain extent surprising that education in the light of human learning was not mentioned, as purported by innovative Brazilian Physical Education trends. This factor could represent that although pedagogical trends are widely discussed as a theory, the practical application of its dissemination in undergraduate courses is slow and reaches a small portion of both instructors and students.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the situation under study, differences were identified between body-related concepts as perceived by junior and senior undergraduate students. Initially, the category

⁹ The authors most mentioned are: Aucouturier, Ajuriaguerra, Dupré, Le Boulch, and others like Vigotsky, Piaget, Wallon and João Batista Freire.

‘fragmented body awareness’ was predominant, which became weaker as the more ‘integrated body awareness’ concept gained strength. This change in body awareness was also observed when undergraduate students were asked about the performance of the Physical Education instructor. As well as the biology-oriented traditional discourse, seniors’ answers addressed the corporality approach.

It was also identified that there is consensus among undergraduate students that the Physical Education instructor interferes in their students’ body awareness, basically by guiding them about health, aesthetics and technical related issues. However, it was observed that for seniors, the pedagogical aspect was significantly more prominent.

The conclusion is that body awareness of undergraduate students of the course under study is still marked by a biology-oriented trend, as was to be expected, given the historical background of Physical Education. Nevertheless, there were important signs of change or expansion of this perception, notwithstanding other complex and associated factors, possibly due to the theoretical framework ensuing from subjects that are part of the syllabus of the Bachelor’s course studies herein.

A visão de corpo na perspectiva de graduandos em Educação Física: fragmentada ou integrada?

Resumo: Os objetivos dessa pesquisa foram: conhecer e comparar a visão de corpo dos graduandos em Educação Física de primeiro e últimos períodos; investigar de que forma relacionam o corpo à Educação Física e à prática profissional. Os procedimentos metodológicos envolveram a aplicação de questionários a 103 alunos de um curso de graduação em Educação Física, bem como análise documental. Os resultados revelaram a predominância de uma visão técnico-biológica e fragmentada de corpo no primeiro período e, nos últimos, uma compreensão mais integrada de corpo. A forma de atuação profissional estaria ligada à orientação, nas perspectivas de saúde, estética e técnica.

Palavras-chave: Corpo. Educação Física. Formação de professores.

El cuerpo en la visión de estudiantes de Educación Física: fragmentada o integrada?

Resumen: Los objetivos de esta pesquisa son investigar y comparar la visión de cuerpo de estudiantes de primero y último semestres de Educación Física, además investigar como relacionan el cuerpo a la práctica profesional. Para la colecta de datos, fué utilizado un cuestionario aplicado a 103 estudiantes de Educación Física y analice documental. Los resultados revelan predominancia de una visión técnica y fragmentada del cuerpo en el primer período y una comprensión integrada en el último período. La forma de la atuação profesional estaria conetada con la orientación, sobre-todo en las perspectivas de salud, estética y técnica.

Palabras clave: Cuerpo. Educacion Física. Formacion de professores.

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