

MEN ON THE LIMIT OF PAIN IN BODYBUILDING AT A FITNESS CENTER LOCATED IN A LOW INCOME NEIGHBORHOOD: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY ON THE PLURAL WAYS OF EXPRESSING MASCULINITY

*HOMENS NO “LÍMITE” DAS DORES NA MUSCULAÇÃO DE UMA ACADEMIA
DE GINÁSTICA DE BAIRRO POPULAR: UMA ETNOGRAFIA SOBRE FORMAS
PLURAIS DE EXPRESSÃO DA MASCULINIDADE*

*HOMBRES EN EL “LÍMITE” DE LOS DOLORES EN LA MUSCULACIÓN DE UN
CENTRO DE ACONDICIONAMIENTO POPULAR: UNA ETNOGRAFÍA SOBRE
LAS FORMAS PLURALES DE EXPRESIÓN DE LA MASCULINIDAD*

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Keywords:

Pain.
Fitness Centers.
Ethnography.
Masculinity.

Abstract: This ethnographical study looks into body representations, specifically pain and its relationship with expressions of masculinity. It examines how views of pain and masculinities can affect people's interactions when bodybuilding in a fitness center located in a popular neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro. Based on the theory and methodology of symbolic interactionism, it was possible to see how the diversity of ways of being a man interferes with multiple views of pain and limits in risk management in body practices.

Palavras chave:

Dor.
Academias de
Ginástica.
Etnografia.
Masculinidade.

Resumo: Este estudo etnográfico trata sobre a relação das representações de corpo, mais especificamente no que diz respeito à dor e sua relação com as expressões da masculinidade. O objetivo foi analisar de que formas as noções de dor e de masculinidades podem atravessar as interações dos praticantes de musculação de uma academia de ginástica de bairro popular do Rio de Janeiro. Pela ótica teórico-metodológica do interacionismo simbólico, foi possível perceber como a diversidade de modos de ser um homem interfere em múltiplas concepções de dores e de limites da gestão de riscos durante as práticas corporais.

Palabras clave:

Dolor.
Gimnasios.
Etnografía.
Masculinidad.

Resumen: Este estudio etnográfico aborda la relación de las representaciones del cuerpo, específicamente en lo que se refiere al dolor y su relación con las expresiones de la masculinidad. El objetivo fue analizar cómo las nociones de dolor y masculinidad pueden incidir en las interacciones de los participantes de culturismo en un gimnasio en un barrio popular de Rio de Janeiro. Con el soporte teórico y metodológico del interaccionismo simbólico, se percibió cómo la diversidad de modos de ser un hombre interfiere en las múltiples concepciones de dolores y de límites en la gestión de riesgos durante las practicas corporales.

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Received on: 04-03-2015
Approved on: 08-23-2015



1 INTRODUCTION

Approaching the notion of gender entails engaging directly or indirectly with what is meant by male or female sexes (DINIS, 2013). While the category of gender refers to sociocultural and historical constructs ascribed to men and women, the notion of male and female sexes is guided primarily by its biological aspects (LOURO, 2008). Therefore, this anthropological study starts from the idea that the notions of masculinity and femininity pervade men and women plurally in different social groups and historical times (GOELLNER, 2010).

Although the debate on gender has gained ground during the 1960s and 1970s with feminist movements claiming their rights in favor of gender equality and against discrimination towards women, it was only in the 1990s that studies related to male identities gained significant attention (CITELI, 2005). The increasing number of studies on the subject of masculinities is mainly due to the loss of social privileges that such gender identity has been suffering (HEILBORN; CARRARA, 1998), which contributed to strengthen investigations on victimization of men (MOUTINHO; SAMPAIO, 2005).

In the field of anthropology, Gastaldo and Braga (2011) point out that the male ethos has been recurring in several studies, showing that the assertion of men's place is often crossed by practices of dispute and competition between them. According to Helman (1994), in the field of health, men tend to suffer without emotions or complaints when faced with distress and pain.

In this context, the specific interest in thinking about men and their pain in fitness centers' bodybuilding areas seems to follow certain trends in body uses in the literature on the subject. Studies are usually consistent with the work of Trabbold (2010), who found body meanings for teenagers that oscillate between dissatisfaction with their body images and seeking bodybuilding and fitness centers to increase muscle mass. Moreover, views on health and aesthetics for those men are often linked to body attributes or attitudes classically associated to masculinity such as strength, honor and physical well-being (SABINO, 2004 FERREIRA; CASTRO, GOMES, 2005, CESARO, 2013).

However, reflecting about masculinity is increasingly necessary. Since it has now been present for over two decades, variations around the concept must be explored (SEPARAVICH; CANESQUI, 2013). Since Mauss (1979) there has been a prospect on how and what types of feelings certain social groups should express. However, we need to relativize genders and their relations with pain and risk as there are different masculinities imbricated in the health-disease process (GOMES *et al.*, 2014).

Therefore, this study focuses on the different views of men who attend fitness centers about their pains and their risks. In particular, regarding gender, this study also understands that other social markers such as social class can substantially interfere in men's body uses (GARDEN, 1991; GUEDES, 1997; SOUZA, 2010) as noted in some studies in the areas of bodybuilding and fitness centers (IRIART; ANDRADE, 2002; IRIART; KEYS; ORLEANS, 2009; KEYS, 2010).

Thus, this study examines how the notions of pain and masculinities can cross bodybuilders' interactions in a fitness center in a low income neighborhood.¹

¹ This study was derived from a PhD thesis in Public Health presented at the Institute of Studies in Public Health of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (SILVA, 2014), and it was approved by its Research Ethics Committee (CAAE: 01559712.7. 0000.5286/report number: 203.235).

2 METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

This study is a type of qualitative research that, according to Turato (2011), is characterized by a comprehensive-interpretative approach. Based on anthropological reflections of the Chicago School, more precisely the perspective of symbolic interaction (BECKER, 1996), we understand that subjects do not always behave in the same way, since it is in certain circumstances that they behave in some socially constructed way (BECKER, 2007).

This research used the compound ethnographic method with participant observation as its main technique. The choice of ethnography was justified by the need of prolonged insertion in the research field for the ethnographer to have an in-depth look into the worldview of subjects in a given social phenomenon (VELHO, 1994). Participant observation was characterized by the presence of the observer in subjects' – 15-50-year-old male students – everyday situations, with minimal disturbance to social relations established there. The observer is part of the environment under observation, modifying and being modified by that context (SCHWARTZ; SCHWARTZ, 1955). A field diary was developed to analyze and interpret what was recorded daily, following Weber (2009, p. 158-159):

It is in the field diary that ethnographic "discipline" is fully exercised: that is where events observed or shared must be related and material to analyze respondents' practices, discourses and stances must be accumulated. Furthermore, relations established between ethnographer and subjects must be updated and the observer's position must be made objective. [...] besides describing and analyzing the phenomena studied, understanding the places that will be related by those observed to the observer and clarifying the latter's attitude in interactions with the former.

For twelve months (July/2012-July/2013), twice a week on average over a period of four hours (5pm-9pm), the observation was carried out in the bodybuilding sector of a small fitness center in a low-income neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro. The neighborhood consists of slums and includes poor and degraded urban areas, although we recognize that the profile is heterogeneous, multiple and not so stereotypical (PRETECEILLE; VALLADARES, 2000), thereby preventing geographical determinism about the beliefs and values of those who live there.

3 PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In the context of local everyday interactions, we observed that masculinities were permanently based on a relational gender perspective. This led us to think that most male students wanted to preserve what Goffman (2011, p. 17) called "face-work":

[...] the phrase "to lose face" seems to mean to be in wrong face, to be out of face or to be shamefaced. The phrase "to save one's face" appears to refer to the process by which the person sustains an impression for others that he has not lost his face. [...] one can say that "to give face" is to arrange for another to take a better face than he might otherwise have been able to take, the other thereby gets face given to him, this being one way in which he can gain face.

That is, because of the need to assert themselves as men, students often wanted to exalt the way their activities at the fitness center were compromised by their female partners' excessive sexual demands. Statements common at the establishment include: "It's hard, I have

to turn off my cell phone because they want sex, I get fucked. And when I fuck them, I'm too tired to work out!" "Can I go a whole month without fucking? After carnival, I'll try it because I want to grow!" I could grow more, but they are the problem, and that stops the workout here!" "I feel like shit, totally sleepy, besides samba and work, I have to disappear from the gang; it's women all the time, how can I work out right here?"

Thus, conversations about their relationships with women were constant in the bodybuilding space: someone would find out that he had one more child, that he had been cuckolded or dumped by a woman, of being in a "crisis" or even that women forbade him from working out were some examples of how they might be affected by those relationships and thus have their performance at the fitness center damaged. That is, typical male moral was shaken and face-to-face performances regarding the "limits" of "being a man" were therefore shaken too. Building on the point of view of Jardim (1991), women caused a sort of "symbolic death" to men because they became synonyms with obligation and tasks, that is, women took men away from what was playful.

While we observed the need to reinforce an androcentric ideal type, we noticed how those students were extremely shaken when they had a problem concerning their women and which influenced their performance during exercise. They usually told and commented on their experiences as "stallions", how they "had done 'm all" in their social environments, often in alleged extramarital relationships. On the other hand, there were times when they would come in quietly or even shy, since they were "bothered" by women. Thus, their love and sexual performances were strictly related to the difficulty of achieving the desired "limits" of the body, expressed through pain, here related to alleged injuries.

When a student began to feel a sharp or chronic pain already established, we noticed that, with continued exercise over the weeks, he would gradually abandon bodybuilding until the moment when he would completely disappeared from the place for some time. Thus, only the extreme sensation of acute and chronic pain restricted the engagement of many students in exercise. Students usually interrupted body practices only when it was no longer possible to move in any way, as if their bodies in pain were "enemies" to be fought:

I: Long time no see, Edilson, where have you been?

Edilson: I stopped for a week, bro!

I: Wanted to rest a little?

Edilson: Dude, I actually had a problem in my forearm, it's true, it hurt a lot, I could not even hold a weight or do some tasks during the day, now I think I already can, I'm back today, I'll see if it's possible!

Rodrigo: I go on, even with pain!

I: Why? What happened?

Rodrigo: I'm doing this lifting here and I'm feeling a lot of pain, I keep doing it because I know that the execution is correct, I just don't understand this pain; I'll go as far as I can!

Apparently, it was either the pain or him (the student) who would win in that bodybuilding space. Many students returned to the establishment on occasion saying they were "just sick" at first, but later admitted that they had paused exercising because of the intense pain caused by

alleged injuries in a given body part. Therefore, we saw that working out in pain was “normal”, which showed that the idea that the symptoms generated by certain pains widely spread by the biomedical view could be understood differently, that is, a “manly” and “working” man should withstand anything.

Numerous examples showed that: massaging one’s own arms before resuming every movement and saying that working out in pain was “fucking hard” because he had hurt himself two days before, and saying he wanted to go home, a student continued his exhaustive exercise routine. Another student was all the time “putting his joint in place” during exercise and saying that, due to dislocation, he looked like a “toy to assemble and disassemble” like “lego”. After having conducted an exercise in a lying position, a student could not get up, what made him put his hand on his shoulder in pain saying that there was more weight on one side of the iron bar than on the other, but in fact it was the force deficit he had on the affected side. These and many other situations illustrated this point.

On many occasions, students sought to ease the pain using several devices combined in order to remain engaged in body practices given those “limits” – for example, using elastic bandages or gauze on the place, ice packs, etc. Sometimes the same gauze was fixed in distinct regions of the body as the muscle of each joint was exercised, that is, if they worked out their legs, students fixed gauze on their knees or ankles; if they exercise their arms, they tied the gauze on elbows or wrists, and so on. They also used ointments and analgesic drugs, anti-inflammatory drugs and antibiotics permanently to tolerate the pain during physical practices, and they were routinely shared among them.

Some of those students seemed to cultivate or aspire to an ideal androcentric type in the bodybuilding space as they were “strong” and “virile” in order to stand acute or chronic pain. Sabino (2003) explains that the concept of androlatry can be characterized by the pursuit of certain masculinization, a set of values related to virility to be pursued. Some androcentric models of typically male physical appearances and attitudes served for most men to legitimize their pain in that fitness center, for example, bulky, tattooed bodies “designed” by muscles or scars, sweating, etc. Those bodies were “worthy” of suffering with behaviors that hypervalued the masculine, “always without any risk to health”, representing a kind of gender capital (BRIDGES, 2009).

Depending on the fitness center’s social group, complain about those types of pain related to possible injury could be considered not too masculine for everyone there and thus a reason for mockery by the subjects who worked out while feeling such physical discomforts:

Mountain: Come here. Remember the pain of the other day? Hell, I’m still feeling it!

I: I saw you stretching there, I already suspected it! What are you doing to improve that?

Mountain: I’m not doing anything, I keep working out.

I: Hell no, you reduced the weights and is sadder today around the weight room! Are you taking any medication? Have you seen a doctor?

Mountain: I don’t take medicine, I can stand it! There is nothing at the public clinic!

I: And that stretch over there on the bar?

Mountain: I’ve done it, I’ll continue anyway, until it goes away! I’m a man, dammit!

Cauã: What are you doing today?

Xandão: My back!

Cauã: Tell me what you're doing for exercise!

Xandão: Dude, I don't do seated paddle or unilateral exercises on one side because I might end up forcing it more than the other side, I'm afraid that something happens, then I'd rather do it all heavy and together, to balance it.

Mountain: Stop being a fag, you're supposed to feel pain, soldier!

Thus, with regard to this context of androcentrism, some students – more experienced ones, advanced or veterans and beginners or newcomers, hid their physical discomfort caused by acute and chronic pain during body practices, thus reinforcing a kind of masculinity, since “real men feel no pain”. According to Connell (2008), not expressing pain can be a sign of virility, demonstrating how certain types of discomfort behaviors are learned in childhood. Sarti (2001, p. 10) also points out that “gender divisions establish very different ways of dealing with pain. Silently standing pain can be a sign of virility in certain cultures, which, in turn, enable and value explicit expression of suffering in women”.

Thus, the bodybuilding space provided an interactive environment in which some students, when exercising, could not express their pain since it would morally belittle them and question their heterosexual orientation. Although there were a number of verbal and nonverbal means to feel pain, either more expressive or more restrained, we noticed that male students calculated the costs and benefits of how to express them, because they had to act “like men” all the time.

Arguing that one could stand such pains represented a prestigious position in most social groups attending the fitness center because there, according to Le Breton (2009), the “risk” would be to not take the “risk” around the body “at the limit” of masculinity. Thus, for example, instead of complaining about pain, the expressions used included “this pain feels good”, “I work out even in pain!”, “I feel nothing, just a little pain!” and were usually followed by some swearing to prove that they were “macho”.

In short, many male students at the fitness center who were in pain tended to continue physical exercises while hiding their pain, since expressing them or feeling at “risk” would be considered “faggot” behavior. On the other hand, they often had to express these physical discomforts and possible injuries publicly in order to assert their masculinity. According to Le Breton (2009, p. 18), “the ways to challenge danger that characterize popular environments in risky trades or functions refer to an identity construction of masculinity based on courage, strength, stamina, dexterity etc”. Thus, challenging certain “risks” translated as a kind of masculinity that is well accepted there, especially when there was an idea associated with the working man, that is, “who took did it rough” in bodybuilding and at work as well.

The identities of most male students were built on the idea that “healing” processes should also be “painful”. Thus, disputes over “being” a manly man in everyday life were reproduced during body practices and their relations with acute and chronic pains.

In the words of Le Breton (2009, p. 43): “The fear of losing prestige or the imperative of always wanting to show them a particular skill is an important source of exposure to risk”. Thus, although it was understandable that those male students tried to impose their social places in the establishment by asserting their gender identities before everyone there, we could observe how

pain often advanced in its degrees of complexity, worsening their physical conditions precisely by re-interpreting gender relations and the types of body “limits”. These practices confirm what Helman (1994, p. 152) said: “[...] men’s health – particularly younger ones – is often put at risk by practicing dangerous and competitive sports, body mutilations, initiation rituals and public trials of manliness and machismo typical of many cultures”.

In short, many of the students stopped “working out” only when the pain was really limiting, both during exercise at the fitness center and in their daily activities outside it. According to Jardim (1991), proving oneself a man seems to be the basic premise in male logic or, as Souza (2010) put it, in sociability among men there is continuous reaffirmation of their classic gender identities through mockery.

However, taking into account the interactional or relational aspect, there were also clear reinterpretation and plurality of masculinities that were together in that space. Exemplarily, the most androcentric individuals dominated certain spaces, hampering the exercise of others. They were so feared and avoided that we often saw students “embarrassed” or “afraid” to ask to rotate bodybuilding equipment for fear of “whom they were messing with”, and at each exercise they wanted to do they had to ask if those particular students were using the equipment. When the weight room was empty, especially without the presence of those feared men, other students began exploring and even experiencing some physical exercises that they could not do before.

Thus, less “common” ways of being a man could also be seen at the fitness center, that is, more passive, calm, docile, etc. They were stigmatized – in Goffman’s (2008) sense – or marginalized in that space, since they were “men, but not so much”, and were even seen as losers not only during body practices and their relationship to pain, but also in life in general, at work, in the family, in love relationships, etc.

Therefore, the diversity of body and pain representations and their relationships regarding the plural forms for expressing masculinity that are consolidated at fitness centers invite us to analyze the possible singularities in the space under study, and especially with regard to the wider society. It was evident that there were many male performances during face-to-face contacts, that is, there were “men” and “men.”

5 CONCLUSIONS

In sum, it was possible to understand that the several ways to express masculinity interfere substantially in the ways men see their pain when practicing bodybuilding at that fitness center located in a low income neighborhood. Pain tended to remain in the private domain as a way to show some virile masculinity. As a sign of virility of hegemonic masculinity (CONNEL, 2008) – and, according to Goffman (2002), as performance in face-to-face contacts – expressing or not one’s pain for men of certain social groups still seems to be real (HELMAN, 1994), that is, the risk can be linked to the idea of being considered or not as “man with a capital ‘M’”. However, in some situations, sharing them and remaining in exercise proved that they were “real machos”.

These data reveal that social markers such as gender and social class often influence prescriptive and universal biomedical discourse that governs what would be harmful to subjects. Thus, damage to many male students at the fitness center was not associated only to an alleged

acute or chronic injury, but to how much those pains could compromise their masculinity exercised in daily life, as well as their social roles as successful men in a financially hard life. On the other hand, those men who apparently did not agree with the androcentric ideals so revered in that space and valued “prevention” of certain types of pain were excluded from much of the male public working out there, thus suffering sanctions from “real” men. In other words, the identity construction of the men who attended the academy fitness bodybuilding area was tensioned by strong-weak, heterosexual-homosexual and winner-loser dichotomies, which were part of the ethos both inside and outside that establishment of body practices.

In effect, we need to consider the perspective of the fitness center’s male students not only from the biomedical point of view. The ethnographic enterprise described here indicates that their worldviews should be understood as detached from value judgments about their use of their bodies, using more than the biological parameter. We must understand that each social group linked to masculine references is partly unique and a product of historical and social contexts that include a set of ways of thinking, acting and feeling specific to each man who exercises in the bodybuilding spaces of fitness centers.

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This work has received no financial support.