

Physical education, nutrition and... alcohol! A paradox for the biomedical field and a social distinction element

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Este texto deriva da dissertação de mestrado intitulada "*Faça o que eu digo, mas não o que eu faço: uma análise de discurso sobre práticas alimentares e corporais entre graduandos em Educação Física e Nutrição*", defendida em 2014 por Juliana Brandão Pinto de Castro, orientada por Maria Claudia da Veiga Soares Carvalho e Francisco Romão Ferreira, no Programa de Pós-Graduação em Alimentação, Nutrição e Saúde do Instituto de Nutrição da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro.

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Abstract

This paper aims to undertake an initial approach to the senses and meanings of alcohol consumption among undergraduate students in Physical Education and Nutrition at a university in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The methodological strategy was to articulate participant observation and interviews with these students. According to the biomedical thought, there should be abstinence or at least moderation in the consumption of alcoholic beverages by students in the health field. Moreover, they should be models of good eating and body practices, anyway, considered healthy behaviors, speech that prevails among them in formal academic spaces. However, this does not always occur in everyday life of these young people who organize and/or attend various events in which they consume alcoholic beverages, sometimes in large quantities. Values related to youth, gender and body esthetics are mobilized here. These are related to social life, distinction positions in a strongly hierarchical society, reaction to the social norms and rules, among others aspects in the consumer society. Such practices of alcohol consumption can bring a paradox to the biomedical field and a social element of distinction for those students.

Keywords: Physical Education and Training. Alcohol Drinking. Nutritional Sciences. Students. Alcoholic Beverages.

Introduction

Leisure time includes relaxing, laid back group activities, or simply passing some time alone doing something considered pleasant and entertaining. There enters a number of activities reported by undergraduate students in Physical Education and Nutrition from a public university in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro: navigating the social networks; playing games on the computer, *notebook* or *smartphone*; reading books or magazines; going to the beach; running trails; going to the movies or theater; sleeping a lot; practicing various sports, including adventure sports; and going out with friends to restaurants, bars, and parties. Among the last, are the ones that happen at night, going on into the early hours of the morning and with a large consumption of alcoholic beverages.¹

In this article we will give an emphasis to the leisure time that includes the ingestion of alcoholic drinks. This consumption goes against the biomedical recommendations of moderation and temperance that advise not only to control, but preferably to eliminate the ingestion of alcohol,² standards of restraint that are also in accordance with certain moral levels of a capitalist society, as analyzed by Weber.³ The agents of this *field* are situated within particular circumstances, as students formed as health professionals, that looking from the biomedical point of view, should adopt eating and bodily practices that are in agreement with the maintenance of a healthy organism, which clashes with the consumption of alcohol. It is hoped that they would be models that correspond to the hegemonic standards of health, examples of behavior considered healthy.⁴

In this context, our objective is to establish an initial approximation to the understanding of meanings and significances of alcoholic beverage consumption among undergraduate students of Physical Education and Nutrition, here taken to be representatives of professional formation in the *fields* of Science and Health.

Theoretical and methodological approach

This article is the fruit of a broader study, socio-anthropological in nature¹, in which the greater methodological concern resides in the description, comprehension, and interpretation of phenomenon observed in two specific groups inserted into the areas of the Health Sciences: the students of the undergraduate courses in Physical Education and Nutrition from a public university located in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro. We've taken a critical look at the practices and discussions of these undergraduate students, from the theoretical-conceptual options concerned with in the works of the German sociologist Max Weber.^{5,6}

In order to conduct this study, we've chosen the methodological strategy of articulating direct and participant observation,⁷⁻⁹ in addition to the informal and in-depth interviews^{10,11} with undergraduate students from Physical Education and Nutrition, which were recorded and transcribed. Because the subjects represent diverse roles within different contexts, adopting postures and language more or less formal depending on each situation, in order to fit the scope of this research study, we selected diverse spaces of the university to be the locations of observation, including hallways, classrooms, snack bars, libraries, gymnasiums, gyms, and elevators, aside from those outside the college, where there are numerous bars and restaurants.

The formal interviews were carried out in classrooms at the university, where the interviewees agreed to fill out the Term of Free and Clarified Consent, respecting the ethical aspect of research studies that involve human beings. The research study was submitted and approved by the corresponding Ethics in Research Committee.

The university students, moderation and the parties: between the said and done

When the theme “consumption of alcohol” was addressed with the students of Physical Education and Nutrition in the formal academic environment, we documented the generalized speech: they drink, but with awareness and moderation. Moreover, for the excesses, there is the “moral hangover” coming from the “shame” of having done something they wouldn't have done if it hadn't been for the inebriating effect of the drinks. Almost always, “going past the limit” is cause for laughter and jokes for days and even weeks after the “keggers”, barbeques, sports games or parties related to the courses they attend. The “moral punishment” is ruthless and difficult to deal with, mainly when there isn't a strong enough sense of humor to get through the adversity.

However, in informal situations, it is possible to perceive other dimensions and perspectives about the theme.

Monday of November, 2013, in a week with a holiday on Wednesday and class on the following two days. After administering a class for the Physical Education undergrad group, I closed my classroom and left to drop off my key at the secretary's office, located at the end of the hallway. On the way, I observed a group of students talking near the water fountain. I took the opportunity to grab my water bottle from the side of my backpack. There was one student filling her bottle and one student waiting. The rest of the students, excited and amused in conversation said:

- But is it open bar?

- They said that there, if you get 20 people together you win a combo with champagne.

- *The birthday girl and a date are free if she brings 10 more people.*
- *Take him as your date.*
- *But, he is also a birthday boy!*
- *After 20 caipirinhas (Brazilian alcoholic drink)...*
- *After four in the morning, they serve breakfast there.*

In the Physical Education University Games (*Jogos Universitários de Educação Física - JUEF*), alcoholic drinks have their place. The Physical Education students of the university in question, that traveled to participate in the competition, made a banner and displayed it in the stands where the games were to be carried out, together with the fans. The banner had the following phrases: “[...] *we drink, get crazy, and on the next day we play*”.

For festivities of this type, some students take a mug especially made for each event, able to hold a liter “*of pure ostentation and happiness*”. One student of this course affirms:

It became a tradition to travel n hours all the way to São Paulo and take advantage of these four days of lots of competition, integration, organization, and exchange of culture with folks from other universities.

In the Nutrition course space, a pamphlet received called attention: it was the “kegger” to receive the freshman of the second semester 2013. The image chosen by the organizers to represent the event was that of an children’s animation character, although “juiced up”, with muscles and veins popping out, holding an apple and a bottle (*squeeze*) usually used to mix protein products (or other food supplements) with water. It can be said that every “body builder” that respects himself has his *squeeze*. Even more, they make a point of portraying him in the training environment, shaking the bottle among the equipment and mirrored walls, captivating looks and attention and whatever else is possible to obtain in this universe of worship of the defined and hypertrophied body. To follow, some of the sayings that made up the pamphlet.

[...] and now, to open the semester with the golden key, Nutrition puts itself in the people’s “kegger” route and this time, with a party organized only for us, finally!

So, everybody must be there, no excuse, because in the end, everybody will want to graduate and tell the stories that they were at the FRIST NUTRITION KEGGER [...].!

[...] Therefore, let’s go straight to the point, in the end we all miss a good “kegger” [...].! Haha!

But lets talk about what is interesting:

OPEN BAR:

Beer

Water

Soda

For the looser ones, Vodka inside at R\$2.00

And what's more we have Shots of tequila especially for HER and Santa Dose in abundance for everybody!

Tickets: FEM (Special promotional lot at R\$20.00) EXTREMELY LIMITED!

[...] Purchases, only with the coolest students of Nutrition [...]

[...] EVENT FOR 18 YEARS AND OVER

In the same way, the students of Physical Education also chose a children's character as a symbol to represent them, and that equally showed the considerably developed musculature, when compared to the original. What does it carry in its hands? A bottle of beer.

In an informal interview, talking with two Physical Education students, we spoke about the keggers. See parts of our conversation below.

Ah, I enjoy them! [...]

You leave class, you've already had it, wanting to throw everything up in the air. Then, you go down and there is a ["kegger"]... I think that that right there is sort of [...] entertainment... You leave the college campus and go home. You spend all your time at college, when there aren't holidays... So, you need an escape valve. And that, there, was like, you're leaving your class there and you go hang out here, even though you have a thousand things to study. Full of books... But you stay there. Then, you see... There are people who just make it social, just have one social drink... Just as there are those who loose control.

So, you leave your class and stay down there. The fun of it is that. So much so that there are people who go home and don't come back. But you are in the flow, you just stay, the way you are. But, then there is nothing healthy about it, you don't eat right.

But, at the same time... That's what young people do, right? Mess up so that later you learn that you can't mess up anymore.

In addition to the keggers, the students usually go to the dive bars near the university to have “a cold one” with friends. Commemorate the defense of a Course Conclusion Paper (*Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso - TCC*) is one of the reasons. Thus it is noticed, that alcohol represents a value, and among the majority of students, a way of dealing with the world of professional responsibilities and academia. “Beer”, “ice cold”, “blonde”, “hops juice”, “have a drink” make up the youthful *ethos*, having a space in the dialogues and invitations for going out and socializing, showing alcohol to be an element of preference in moments of leisure. In a playful tone, they go on to repeat current phrases that play with the nutritional and medicinal standards and their limitations within a social life: “*I never made friends while drinking milk*” and “*I drink to get sick, if it were to get well I would take medicine*”; they show themselves constantly in pictures posted on social networks, documenting the events while lifting personalized mugs, cups and glasses like trophy’s for being of university social distinction.

Diverse discussions built within the biomedical niche refer to alcoholic drinks as prejudicial to the organism. The list of harmful effects is extensive and amply publicized. They are damaging to physical activity and the practice of sports, limitations for health, problems with body composition, in particular, concerning obesity,¹²⁻¹⁶ in addition to serious threats to society, for its association with violence, traffic accidents, including damages to the economy by way of, for example, absences at work.^{17,18} From this point of view, the consumption of alcohol results in human disqualification. Many negative moral values that inhabit social life are anchored in scientific truths. Such truths are often accompanied by the words rigor and rigidity when others judge people who drink alcohol.

As an individual case, we’ve documented that red wine is usually not as condemned within the biomedical world, when consumed in moderation, since in it is found a substance called resveratrol. It is believed that resveratrol protects the heart from cardiovascular problems, helps in the control of cholesterol and in the fight against free radicals, preventing and participating in the treatment of chronic illnesses, those that are found to be booming in contemporary societies. Still, we document the guidance for those who don’t drink wine: they shouldn’t, in this case, begin to consume it only for these beneficial effects, because there is the alternative of grape juice, that unusually has a similar amount of resveratrol without having the harmful effects of the alcohol.¹⁹

In other words, for biomedicine, avoiding alcohol is the golden rule, if the desire is the elimination of risks, stable health, or as it were, perfect, and an ideal sportive performance, in addition to the complete avoidance or eradication of possible damage to society. People who follow these practices are highly valued in these spaces, guaranteeing as a consequence, the success of professionals in health institutions, of medications, of supplies, of the most varied products and services, widely distributed and marketed in name of the adding years onto life and better individual and collective performance.

However, alcohol consumption is common among university students of courses situated in the scientific field of health, practices that go against the biomedical recommendations of abstinence or moderation in the consumption of alcohol, and that also collide, in a pointed way, with the reiterated recommendation of eight hours of sleep per night that prevails in the Physical Education field - after all, these outings go late into the night.

For students, the “*all-nighter*” seems to represent a form of integration and social interaction; in the same way, sportive games. Far from routine, controls, the demands that repetitively recommend balance, moderation and temperance always present, ultimately, the many hours of travel, is the space of boldness and happiness, where the biomedical rules and a few other forces do not appear to have a place - and act of commensality representing the *social value* of the encounter and the exchange. “This may encourage the thought that the reason behind the drinking is social”,²⁰ as a possible means for expressing what is common to them.

From a different perspective, it is worth remembering the play on words and images present in the flyers that announced the keggers. The symbolic value of the apple associated with health and nutritional standards like, for example, in the phrase: “One apple a day keeps the doctor away”. Here, the apple in the hand of the icon presented in the flyer of the Nutrition “kegger” refers to sex, which pairs up with the bottle of beer carried by the character on the Physical Education flyer. Playing with images, these text tell us about youth models, aesthetics, pleasure and sex in a scenario of consumption in representations that also show attitudes of detachment in relation to the biomedical rules of moderation, putting into question the social norms of moderation and temperance.

Escaping from the world of constant obligations, questioning it or at least running away for a few moments seems as well to be a representation of alcohol consumption in these events. Differently from other substances that also have psychoactive effects, alcohol has a place of great acceptance and is stimulated in many occasions in our culture, crossing different regions, social classes, or even specific professional categories.

*The consumption of drugs has been associated with the transgression of standards and the pursuit to suppress the oppression of individuals and groups, counterculture and the pursuit to enhance pleasure and the re-enchantment of a disenchanted world, in addition to being associated with the triumphant expansion of the psychic reality [...]. In Anthropology, more specifically, the use of drugs can be associated to the theory of rites and rituals relating them to the mystical experiences or the perpetrated deviation by certain groups that, in one way or another, tend to promote a type of momentary suspension in the dominant social structure, be it to reaffirm or to foresee its modification, in addition to making up items that could be present in rites of passage in which an individual moves from one determined status to another.*²²

Like an *ethos*, mainly among the youth, the use of drugs has a strategic position in the subversion of the dominant culture. “They would represent the access to “another world” caused by the perceived transformations provoked. A type of “escape” from the system, even though momentary”.²² Similarly, Contreras & Garcia ²⁰ state:

[...] considering the practices of different cultures, what is certain is that there exists a generalized consumption of substances, that in greater or lesser measurements, are stimulants and can provoke personality alterations. Of all of them, without a doubt, the consumption of alcohol is the most widespread. Within each society, the ingestion of alcoholic drinks has its own rules and meanings.

Ultimately, “the behavior of the drinker is determined, in large part, by the cultural standards themselves”.²⁰ The first alcohols were administered with the intention of treating diverse physical and mental disorders. Its taste, which *a priori* is considered unpleasant, ends up being accepted. This is due to a “particularity that differentiates human beings from the rest of the omnivorous mammals: humans consume products whose taste is unpleasant, at least in the first three or four times that they are tasted”.²⁰ This way, the alcoholic drinks, as well as spice, ginger, and coffee, perform a function of adaptation in certain environments. Our capacity to consume “certain food that at first seem unpleasant reveals to be, as well, especially adaptive”.²⁰ In other words, the palate is adaptable, in biological or cultural ways; human food is a “bio-cultural phenomenon” or, said in a classical way, is a bio-psychosocial” fact, that is, a “total social fact”.²⁰

Just like hunger, thirst is also biology. Therefore, the *eat* and the *drink* are in a social and cultural order, inhabiting and assuming peculiar meanings, constructing specific meanings in the social actions.²³ If in the formal academic scenario, alcohol is treated in the biomedical terms of temperance, the hallways, elevators, and stairs showed themselves as locations where talk about alcoholic beverage and arranging “ethylic” outings is current and desired practice: socially constructed propensity over foundations that also provide social distinction.

In this study, the alcoholic drink expresses, among other significations, an adaptation of the *ethos* of the environment and age group of public university undergraduate students: a collectively shared value that distinguishes them as youth that have reached a position that few are able to climb to, on the difficult and steep social ladder of a country marked by one of the deepest inequalities of the planet.

Pierre Bourdieu²⁴ considers that the social world operates as a system of power relations and as a symbolic system, in that distinctions of taste become the basis for social judgment. In this way, diverse practices maintain correspondence with distinctions, or in other words, the decisions

about what and how to do this or that are made taking into account what other people in other social classes do, the values that represent them and the symbolic power and/or material that makes them able to capitalize.

For Bourdieu, taste is an object that that enables a rare case of similarity between the sociology and a social psychoanalysis, where “judgment of taste is a supreme manifestation of discernment”. This way, social distinction implies a displacement of social roles and of symbolic elements, which can be related with a consumption that differentiates the individuals, as much by the mode in which they consume, as for the symbolism of a self-proclaimed good. This distinction is created within the group itself, each one with its variations, following a hierarchy of social values.²⁵

In some ways, this approach frees us from a determinist perspective, since it eases the extremes and relates the symbolic elements to a social context. We reiterate that we don't deal with, here, the identification of a cause and a consequence in the approach to alcohol consumption, stressing even more that this linearity doesn't happen in practice. The meanings and significations are “fillings” of the practice, building a *habitus* in the sense of future disposition, without commitment to a determinist linear evolution. This allows a certain drive in the identification of questions such as the leisure time of university students of this research study. In certain moments, certain types of entertainment are more or less valued, which can confirm, or not, certain *status*, certain *distinction* among these people and the groups they are connected to.

In this sense, not always what is said about what is done follows what is actually done, creating a space of *décalage*:²⁶ this life space that converges among the standards and the effective practices, among the values that operate as counterpoints. This space or gap left between one phenomenon and another of human existence so that they can dilate, expand, swell, without compromising or rupturing the structure, makes it possible to identify the reflexive character of life, reacting to the disciplinary system while accepting it at the same time.

*In this sense, a décalage represents strategies of coexistence in which the subjects have the ability to create a type of counter power, as a response to a social system that reproduces oppression in the name of equality, liberty, beauty, aesthetic, and health.*²⁷

To think that it is possible to maintain oneself permanently within the nutritional and bodily rules of biomedicine implies the minimization and even exclusion of subjective questions, because they are contradictory and tense. It is fundamental to emphasize that the subjects are as much a part of the Food and Nutrition and Physical Education fields as they are of science and human life itself.

In the real world of consumption,^{28,29} distinct realities are put together: the practices associated with style, that provoke the pleasures of leisurely consumption, beside the acceleration of life with more and more tasks to complete, stressful and apprehensive. In this scenario of complex paradoxes, the contradiction should be considered relevant.

The décalage is inherent to the game of life where what is said and what is done are two complementary aspects of daily reality, they co-inhabit as subjectivity in social relations, as an expression of human complexity. Some dualisms, apparently contradictory, coexist peacefully at the same time within the subject: to love and to hate the same person; to want to live a great love and to be afraid to suffer; to want to perform physical exercise and to enjoy relaxation and rest; to want to loose weight and to continue to enjoy learned and cultivated foods; and so and so forth. The list of examples to cite is extensive. There is an uncontested and important difference among the practices and the discourse about these practices. What one thinks and what one does is articulated in life, as in the popular saying: "One thing is what we think, another is what we do!" And, far from reducing these phenomenon to "mistakes" or "lies", this décalage needs to be perceived as a producer of dynamics in social relations, in human life in society.²⁶

Youth, public university life and the possibility of exercising intense consumption has a great symbolic value in contemporary society, and being in this condition means social distinction. To reach distinction and accumulate symbolic or material capital, the subject considers and counterbalances, in each situation, what is said and what is done; ultimately, depending on what happens, de-capitalizing and loosing are situations that are part of this scenario. The risks of moral judgment and its consequences are not negligible.

Reactions to the world of biomedical and social standards in a given life moment seem to be present, like a search for certain refuge in the face of the demanding pressures of university education - one that situates itself between the control of childhood life and the rigid markers that make up the work environment.

In a place of contradictions, relative values are deployed and related to social coexistence, to the positions of distinction in a strongly hierarchical society and the reaction to social standards and rules, among other aspects, in a society of consumption. Such practices of alcohol consumption bring with them a paradox for the biomedical field and an element of social distinction to these students.

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