

Food, body and subjectivities in Physical Education and Nutrition: rancidity of adiposity and the rise of muscles

Alimentação, corpo e subjetividades na Educação Física e na Nutrição: o ranço da adiposidade e a ascensão dos músculos

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss issues related to body image among undergraduate students in Physical Education and Nutrition programs at a public university in the city of Rio de Janeiro. This study has a socio-anthropological nature in the field of Public Health. The methodological strategy was to articulate participant observation and informal and formal interviews with these students. We found that the students feel pressured to be role models of good eating habits and body practices; in other words, to have behaviors considered as healthy. In addition, they must have a body image that meets the current esthetic standards. This is a discourse that prevails among them, both inside and outside the academic environment. Values relative to youth, sex and body esthetics are mobilized in such environment and associated with social life, distinctive positions in a strongly hierarchical society, and reactions to social norms and rules, among other features in the consumer society, where body image worship tends to be hegemonic.

Keywords: Physical Education and Training. Nutritional Sciences. Students. Body Image. Collective Health.

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é discutir questões relativas à imagem corporal no universo de estudantes dos cursos de graduação em Educação Física e Nutrição de uma universidade pública no município do Rio de Janeiro. Trata-se de estudo de natureza socioantropológica, situado no campo da Saúde Coletiva, cuja

estratégia metodológica consistiu em articular observação participante e entrevistas informais e formais com esses discentes. Observou-se que há uma pressão para que sejam modelos de boas práticas alimentares e corporais, ou seja, comportamentos considerados saudáveis, além de apresentarem uma imagem corporal concernente com os padrões estéticos vigentes, discurso que predomina entre eles nos espaços acadêmicos e fora destes. Valores relativos a juventude, sexo e estética corporal são aí mobilizados e relacionados à convivência social, às posições de distinção na sociedade fortemente hierarquizada, reação às normas e regras sociais, entre outros aspectos na sociedade de consumo, onde o culto à imagem do corpo tende a ser hegemônico.

Palavras-chave: Educação Física e Treinamento. Ciências da Nutrição. Estudantes. Imagem Corporal. Saúde Coletiva.

Introduction

Body *image* and therefore the corporeal capital assume a prominent value in the postmodernity social imaginary, a period that covers the 20th and 21st centuries.^{1,2} The body is not an unequivocal fact but an effect of a social and cultural development, where societies choose certain attributes in which it must be framed so that it can be considered “beautiful” or appropriate, subjecting it to education and various aesthetic, physical and even surgical measures to adapt it to the standard.^{3,4}

An athletic body and especially a “muscular” one, with hyper-maximization of muscle definition and hypertrophy, are valued in the contemporary imaginariess, while a lean body and, more importantly, a fat body, are subject to stigma and constantly approached by initiatives that stimulate adaptation to a hegemonic pattern. There are several TV programs and TV programs attractions^a that promise to offer alternatives so that individuals outside the measures considered healthy can reach the goal established through alimentary adjustment and mainly by the practice of physical exercises. Nevertheless, fat people in today’s society are seen not only as physically, mentally and

a As an example we can cite the “*Medida Certa*” (Right Measurements) attraction in (Brazilian free-to-air television network) Globo’s *Fantástico* (Fantastic) Sunday program, which would offer a follow-up for celebrities and anonymous people for a period of three months to adjust body measurements under the supervision of specialists, as well as other attractions such as “*SOS Mais Você*” (SOS More of You) on the same television network, which would offer aesthetic actions like surgical procedures for the same purpose. TV programs such as “*Além do peso*” (Beyond the Weight) in (Brazilian free-to-air television network) RecordTV and “*Quem perde ganha*” (Who Loses Win) in (Brazilian television network) SBT, just to name the free-to-air television channels, turned the quest for a perfect body in successful reality shows, which would broadly broadcast the hegemonic body model of thinness and flashing muscular physique.

socially ill, but as incapable, lazy, sick, addicted to food, uncontrolled, and with less reasoning, since they do little to adjust to the new pattern.^{5,6}

In a globalized world, there is an increasing homogenization of social relations. Body aesthetic is thus established as an instrument that was also incorporated in consumer relations, subject to standardization of behavior and normalization.⁷ As stated by Lipovetsky & Serroy,⁸ the same beauty model is globally spread through advertising, fashion and cosmetic brands. In the case of women, they identify that the ideal of female workers' robustness and strength in rural communities has given way to a sexy and elongated female aesthetic based on diet, exercise and even surgical procedures. They still retain local characteristics but are within a unified logic, the so-called "glocalization" (a portmanteau of globalization and localization), the adaptation of local aspects to consumption in other communities in a massive way. To that end, body measurement standards need to follow similarities so that they can be applied on a global scale, seeking to minimize the diversity of options.

In this consumer society, anchored in market, advertising and marketing, body image spectacularization is widely publicized in the various mediae. As observed by Luz et al.,^{9,10} magazines use on their covers a much larger proportion of models with bodies within the aesthetic standards considered hegemonic in relation to physiques that present other corporal measures. By combining image and word in a symbiosis, they create a strategy that reinforces the rhetoric of the image. The image/word alliance is the key to building and delivering messages, which must convince the audiences of their importance and lead one to acquire products, habits or behaviors that shall guide their actions in view of life and health.

At various times, magazines adopt a rhetorical perspective in discourse tones, directing the reader to practices consistent with some bioscientific normalcy and the activities recommended by the reports, while at the same time infusing a diffuse fear that some harm to health – or to life – may succeed in case of non-compliance with such practices, emphasizing the collective fear of "punishment" if the rules and norms of conduct presented are not complied to. Foucault has called biopower the set of relations of power/knowledge that affect life, uninterruptedly regulating it and controlling it. In this perspective, life should seek to adjust to these regulations, in search of "good health."¹¹⁻¹⁴

At various moments, manipulation of images to electronic media by raster graphics editors such as Adobe Photoshop, among others, seeks to value important aspects, often reaching perfection characteristics for the body or object presented. The exaggerated use of this technique in several situations provokes situations that escape those found in real life. They are clearly the work of digital retouching. This feature is perceived by the audience, who often does not recognize such a condition as possible. Even the very models and actresses photographed for fitness and fashion

magazines covers and in nude portraits, say they do not recognize themselves in view of so many changes in their physical attributes such as luminosity/brilliance, color intensity, perfect shapes.

Even though they are out of proportion for normal standards, the strength of these images on covers and television programs helps to consolidate in the population's imaginarieness certain ideal types that must be pursued in terms of eating right, body structure and healthy habits. Sharing such images reinforces social representations that disseminate collective and individual mental schemas developed from existing social relations.¹⁵ With this, patterns of attitudes, feelings, actions and interactions are conditioned, which necessarily implies a subjective aspect of these representations, that is, of absorption, interiorization and development by individuals in the most diverse situations of life.^{15,16}

These social representations are also lived by groups, acquiring an objective aspect, that is, of a collective social and therefore cultural nature, subject to the historicity of change, tending to associate and transform into symbolic conceptions that anchor and solidify in the various groups and social classes, constituting a true stable common sense of difficult historical transformation.^{15,17}

We can cite, as an example of social representation that is commonly conveyed in the relationship between female bodies and food, an article published by Brazilian *Veja* magazine,¹⁸ whose cover features a woman in a bikini, next to the text: "The aesthetics of risk: diets, supplements and workouts that are specific of women that defy common sense and lead the body to the limit of healthy leanness."

According to the article, joining two characteristics – the flat belly^b and the six-pack abs – complies to the new minimalist aesthetic pattern of the 21st century body, marking the current representation of beauty to be pursued. The ideal of (nano)beauty presents a conflicting visual: an attractive body – for the present times –, well cared for and healthy, but at the maximum limit of what would be seen as belonging to a sick person. Perhaps the skeleton of muscles, which disguises lightness, provides a normal aspect, the kind that can be imitated.¹⁹

We perceive the discursive character of media productions as social practices, responsible for the process of construction and circulation of meanings on a given topic. They are socially constituted by specific group(s) mediated from the selection and reconfiguration of certain thematic repertoires, making possible the production of different meanings and versions about themselves and the world around them.²⁰

Such meanings are often taken as truth by the audience by virtue of a correspondence, in common sense, between representation and truth. But we know that the subject of knowledge is inserted in the society that takes them by an object. The media contributes to the solidification

b The flat belly has a concave appearance, presenting a certain inward curve.

and dissemination of a specific type of identity. It promotes a first motivational contact of a topic, trends, and scientific and technological advances with the reading audience.²¹

Research done by Ribeiro²² with men (readers or not) about the covers and reports in (the world's largest men's magazine brand) Men's Health^c magazine has found that bodies in an aesthetic (muscular) shape have some preponderance over health because, according to the interviewees, among them the magazine editor, when acquiring an identification with the corporal aesthetic standard presented by the publication, "to the extent that you have a more structured body with more conditioned muscles, you have more energy to do what you want in life. Therefore you have more well-being."²²

As highlighted by Sabino (p. 144),²³ "It is not a matter of taking the media *doxa* as a standard of sociological knowledge but of taking into account the emergence of new trends and social attitudes that the media expresses." We realize then that women, who previously would long for thinness, now also yearn for the athletic physique, once valued and worshiped only by the male audience. What has been sought at gyms, for example, is some body with an absence of fat. Some body with more lean mass than a lean body.²⁴ However, we wonder: What aesthetic pattern is this that co-opts women and men of varying ages and social classes? What body image is this that has become an object of desire but which seems an unattainable ideal for ordinary mortals? What ideal is this that often makes the aesthetic pattern diametrically confront health but which, at other times, makes them both look like dear childhood friends? Finally, how do students of health deal with such issues?

In view of such questions, the following lines are intended to discuss – without intending to exhaust them – the senses and meanings implied in body image in the universe of students in courses of Physical Education and Nutrition, where the cult of the body – more specifically, the body *image* – is hegemonic.

Theoretical and methodological path

This article is the result of a broader socio-anthropological study in which the methodological concern lies in description, understanding and interpretation of phenomena observed in two specific groups inserted in the area of Health Sciences: undergraduate students in Physical Education and Nutrition at a public university located in the city of Rio de Janeiro. We have focused a critical look at these students through theoretical-conceptual options related to works by German sociologist, philosopher, jurist, and political economist Karl Emil Maximilian "Max" Weber.^{25,26}

c *Men's Health* (launched in Brazil in 2006) focuses on being a service magazine for male, heterosexual, middle and upper class men, with topics focusing the body, fitness, aesthetics, beauty, fashion, health and sexuality.²²

To conduct this study, we have chosen a methodological strategy to articulate direct and participant observation,²⁷⁻²⁹ in addition to informal and in-depth interviews^{30,31} with undergraduate students of Physical Education and Nutrition, which were recorded and transcribed. In order to address the scope of the research, we have listed as observation sites the university various places, including corridors, classrooms, canteens, libraries, gymnasium, gym and elevators, as well as the university surroundings. Different observation sites were used in order to enrich the research, as recommended by some authors.³²⁻³⁴

Formal interviews were conducted in classrooms at the university, where respondents agreed to fill out an Informed Consent Form (ICF), complying with the ethical aspects of research involving human beings. The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the Brazilian University Hospital Pedro Ernesto (CEP/HUPE).

Body Image in Physical Education and Nutrition

Sociology treats the body as a biological form shaped by society, which makes it a way of access to understand social phenomena. In this perspective, corporal expressions are revealing of sociocultural logics. Marcel Mauss³⁵ understands the body as a substrate produced by the symbolic dimension of society. In this way, at the core of the corporal movement, the social logic is inscribed. When studying gestures, mimics, suffering, amusements, ways of walking, *physical appearance*, we study the culture itself.³⁵ Thus:

[...] The production of meanings about body image and the perception that the subject has of the body itself is, at the same time, individual and collective. It operates in what is social but is not limited to it. It is developed beyond the individual, interpersonal relationships or intrafamily complexes, blending preverbal intensities, affections and social codes of conduct (p. 480).³⁶

That is, the development of body image is closely linked to structuring the identity within a social group.³⁷ Starting from the concept of a *group body image*, Schilder³⁸ states that the preoccupation with the corporal dimension presented by the people surrounding the individual peremptorily interferes in the development of this individual's corporal image. According to the author, experiences and sensations obtained in actions and reactions to social relations also contribute to structuring the body image.³⁹ Questions related to body image are increasingly present in the field of health and influence the construction of the subject's identity, the subject's perception about their own body (self-image) or what they understand about health.⁴⁰

In order to illustrate the question, we present a speech from a student of Physical Education: "There is the healthy aspect, which fat people are not [...]." Along the same line of thought, Sabino

(p. 197),⁴¹ in his doctoral thesis, states that fat individuals at gyms are the most despised ones. One of the gym attendants who was interviewed by him, even stated, uttering harrowing adjectives: “I hate fat people! They are lazy, reckless, sloppy, slow, losers, stinky!” The author adds that Western cultures in the 20th century began to demonize fat. As a consequence, fat people’s status has changed:

A century ago, in western countries, fat people would be loved. Today, in the same countries, they love the skinny ones. At a time when the rich were fat, a reasonable rotundity would be very well seen. It would be associated with health, prosperity, plausible respectability, but also with whims satisfied... thinness would suggest nothing more than disease (depletion), evilness or unbridled ambition (p. 78).⁶

Likewise, Contreras⁴² states that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such voluminous body, which would be desired as well as associated with health, good reputation and abundance, would be related to women’s sexuality. That is, some body prepared for motherhood and constituting family.

Among the Nutrition course undergraduates, it was noticed that lean bodies are considered relevant (and even determinant) for professional success, since bodies serve as oneself’s personal branding.⁴³ Such body image is considered as a possibility of greater or lesser prosperity and notoriety, being important for insertion in the job market and acquisition of reliability from clients. Students reinforced that “they have to be thin,” especially those who aspire to clinical practice. Otherwise, there is no credibility with clients, who can think what one of them said: “If she does not succeed herself, how can she make me succeed?”

It is clear, therefore, that students and professionals in the food-nutritional or Physical Education fields are demanded and blamed with much more emphasis. Once they are cognizant of the practices considered correct, more than all they are seen as people who have the obligation to act and live in accordance with these increasingly institutionalized norms.⁴⁴ Among nutritionists, for example, the stigma^d generated by obesity directly affects the relationship with work, leading to difficulties in the relationship with patients, in addition to producing a feeling of non-belonging to the profession. In this sense, disapproving fat bodies by patients and colleagues of Nutrition courses themselves – in the paradoxical context of an obesogenic but lipophobic society⁴⁵ – generates situations of suffering at work and in other social relations⁴⁶ because fat people’s image is associated with people who “have no control,” “have no limits,” “go beyond what is necessary,” and therefore are not trustworthy people.⁴⁷

d Stigma relates to some kind of negative value brand embedded in a socially constructed difference. The process of stigmatization takes place in the expectation from people who experience social relations – that is, body fat is not intrinsically good or bad, but the gaze established by people in relation to it is that it gives the fat person the mark of what is undesirable and repugnant.^{47, 57}

What we realize is that today, in fact, the belly (or excess fat around the waist) has been interpreted as a symbol of decadence and nonconformity with the contemporary world. Those who have some extra weight are then judged in a negative and deprecatory way by family, friends, acquaintances and even health professionals.⁴⁷ Body, hair and skin should be clean, especially if the job requires the appearance as a “business card” – as it happens with nutritionists and Physical Education teachers. This conformity in physical shape is what shall provide them legitimacy as professionals.^{43, 48} In this line, “it is worth noting that in Brazil the labor market operates some kind of ‘selection’ that translates into dominant lipophobia” (p. 95).⁴⁷ This mode of discrimination is part of the whole history of “fat people” being today particularly reinforced and reiterated through the processes of medicalization of daily life and of making health aesthetic,⁴⁹ in which what is considered healthy has a direct relationship with physical shape, namely being lean.⁴⁷

It is important to note that the cult of thinness and consequently contempt for fat has a very present significance load in Western societies. In this way, thinness is taken as synonymous with “moderation, self-control, success and social adaptation”. On the contrary, fat, obesity, is perceived as “a moral failure, an inability to control oneself, some lack of discipline or a tendency to laziness” (p. 133).⁵⁰ This justifies, for example, the interviewees’ discourses, both regarding fat body stigmatization and a justification for a healthy life.

As we have discussed at the beginning of this article, anthropologists are unanimous in pointing to the body social dimension.^{33, 51-61} For Geertz,⁶² the best way to measure some people’s social life is through the study of the body. It is in it that we find marks of taboos, rituals, what is sacred, magic and, according to what Novaes & Vilhena⁶³ add, prejudice. This is where fat is placed. At a time when classes or “surplus societies” (p. 44)⁶⁴ tend to present a considerable number of individuals with abundant adipose tissue (due to an excessive consumption of calories and sedentary lifestyles^e), paradoxically the image of the fat potbellied one is, more and more, abominated. The “fat person” often happens to be banned from full social life, being considered sick, carrying psychic and physiological disorders. The fat physique provokes very negative and pejorative evaluations.⁶

Reports from a study carried out with morbidly obese people have shown not only these negative aspects of fat (illness, unwillingness to change, lack of control over food, among others) but also affective deprivation and the consequent isolation from the public world and “imprisonment” in a domestic world. Stuck because of their own difficulties in getting around, dependence and shame in leaving home because of the prejudice they suffer.⁶⁵ Thus, fat takes on some rank of number one enemy of elegance and happiness.⁴⁷

e On such issue, Le Breton⁹⁷ points out that the fact that work technologies increasingly replace activities that require force creates a paradox with the current appreciation of muscularity, since day-to-day tends to save the use of muscles, tending to atrophy them by disuse.

Along the same line of thought, in the present time it seems that, with this new guidelines for bodies, practices which were common in the medieval period are repeated,⁶⁶ such as the demonization and imputation of guilt to divergent ones, be it of religious, ethnic or political characters. Thus,

[...] Obese people [...] seem to be being transformed into a sort of “new heretics” of an emerging “Media Age,” in which means of communication are campaigning, aiming at “improving” the population’s health through reducing body fat, encouraging the population to reach a certain corporal shape considered optimal (p. 113).⁶⁷

As for the body image worshiped, Sabino⁴¹ says that

[...] It is the belly, the abdomen – besides the muscular diameter – the test point of individual excellence. It is as if all arete were concentrated in the center of the body, in the area of the navel. Six-pack abs, full of ripples, folds and muscular folds, due to the absence of fat and constant presence of exercises, are the supreme symbol of health, excellence and beauty. The more baroque the abdominal architecture, the more virtuous the individual shall be (p. 247).

That said, it is perceived that the ways of dealing with the body produce social bonds, with less and less tolerance for deviations in socially established aesthetic standards. In this sense, fat takes on the role of stigma and an ugliness paradigm, where people who are overweight go through some growing social exclusion,⁶³ reverberating in these individuals’ self-image and self-esteem, who tend to become ill and suffer as a result of obesity and the stigma attached to fat.^{68, 69}

According to Mattos,⁶⁹ we live in a society where fat is treated as an intimate enemy, an enemy that, although located inside the body, is visible to the eyes of others. Faced with appeals for a healthy body, identified as some body “without fat,” obese people are increasingly depreciated and pathologized. In line with Mattos, Sabino (p. 152)²³ states that “the representations of health in our societies have now been related to the absence of adiposity and some rigid and apparent musculature.” Tolerance with fat has been reduced so drastically that at present it falls into a category of exclusion. Fat bodies are seen as bodies marked by moral bankruptcy and therefore must be corrected in order to value life.⁷⁰

It is the physical body showing the subject’s identity, i.e., their character, competence and psychological and moral functions.^{71,72} Goldenberg (p. 9)⁷³ synthesizes this sentiment into a slogan proposal for such a body market: “There are no fat and ugly individuals, only fat and lazy individuals.” When considering the “culture of narcissism,” the author presents the prevailing vision in the imaginarieness of the people from the city of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil:

Each individual is considered responsible (and guilty) for their youth, beauty and health: one is ugly only if they want it and one only ages if they don't care for themselves. Each one must seek within themselves imperfections that can (and should!) be corrected. The body also becomes some capital, surrounded by enormous investments (of time and money, among others). The body "in shape" presents itself as a personal success, to which any woman or man can aspire, if they really devote themselves to it (p. 9).⁷³

With regard to social judgment on fat, Fischler⁶ has created two fundamental types of moral stereotypes related to obesity: *the benign obese and the malignant obese ones*. This classification varies according to certain patterns of behavior. In the first group, social scientists fit the people with expansive, extroverted and playful behaviors – the typical friendly chubby who seems to be apologizing for the physical inadequacy, compensating for it through pleasant coexistence. As for the second group, there are individuals who refuse to carry out any type of symbolic transaction, with a view to being socially accepted.

If there is no symbolic restitution that can arouse pity from others, fat people are kept excluded, like social pariahs, since they no longer participate in the social game rules. No wonder in contemporary society obese ones are called "evil" or "damned" – as in the jocular term employed by Fischler. They also have some behavior considered depressive and therefore devoid of the obstinacy necessary for containing their corporal measures. In short, their image shows a certain discouragement towards life and it translates into failure in managing their own body and its limits (p. 21).⁶³

Fischler⁶ treats obesity as a social phenomenon with diverse representations. A classification of the moral stereotypes linked to obese people has been constructed by the author, who points out the ambiguous character that social representations about fat take on in the present imaginarieness. Obese people receive some contradictory treatment, made up of an important paradox: to them are associated stereotypes like friendliness and kindness. On the other hand, their image inspires some social symptom: lipophobicity. It is in this horror of fat that a series of weight-loss techniques are forged, endorsed by the discourses that are built into the fabrics of fitness and bodybuilding cult.

Bauman^{74,75} states that we live in a world full of confusing signs, prone to changing quickly and unpredictably. Likewise, we can think of body image as an instrument of a net and consumer culture that values quick pleasure, immediate results and proven recipes of success. The body has become a commodity that is changed at all times in order to be always updated, fashionable. Patience and uncertainty are diminished – or eliminated – so that the body image is athletic and jovial.

The body cult is also linked to the consumption aspect of today's society, ratified mainly by the media, which emphasizes the beauty standards to be followed and the aesthetic benefits acquired by the care of the body, so that "individuals who can have feel some identification with the idealized

images of youth, health, fitness and beauty have some higher economic exchange value than those who can not or do not wish to appropriate such images” (p. 133).⁵⁰

In this context, a Physical Education course student has commented during the interview: “There is much controversy in our area. I think it’s a very complicated thing ... to deal with these body image disorders. It’s very difficult....” It was then that another student, who until now was only listening to us, said:

At the licentiate degree course we do not see much of it but at the bachelor degree course it is made evident. Like... at the gym we see some very muscular man who... you know... Kind of... in the beginning [somebody asked her]: “Which trainer would you prefer to evaluate you?” I pointed to that one. Then after a while at the gym I went on to choosing the chubby trainer. Then I could see that the chubby trainer would know how to set up a lot more series of exercises than the muscular one. But we see that first we go to the one that is [physically] better because we think he knows more as he is showing it in his body.

Results from a study carried out with Nutrition students in Rio de Janeiro have shown their dissatisfaction with their body and the desire to fit the ideal body pattern in our society, even among students who presented an adequate body mass (BMI) index. However, in the case of future nutritionists, that is, health professionals, this concern to meet the norms becomes more relevant since, in the future, they may treat people with risky eating behaviors.⁷⁶ In addition, results point to a necessary reflection on the use of BMI as a way of classifying subjects’ nutritional states, labeling them, but that is not the purpose of this article.⁶⁵

Indeed,

[...] we’ve been through an era in which the cult of body shape has gained unprecedented breadth. It is no longer new: defined and inflated muscles, tattoos, piercings, silicone implants, botulinum toxin (BTX), artificial tan, plastic surgeries, are constantly present in the daily life in big cities and in the current media. Some kind of body cult – in both senses: physical shape and subjective system – has been consolidating, at least in part, in today’s complex societies, articulating aesthetic standards pursued by a growing number of individuals dissatisfied with their bodies (p. 13).⁴¹

Consequently, maintaining this body always socially adequate reveals that, contrary to this supposed freedom of choice, what we have is a sign of submission of the body to the standards propagated in the media and reproduced by contemporary Western society.^{77,78} Still, in seeking the construction of some body more suited to the hegemonic aesthetic ideals linked to the physical adoration prevailing in our society, we also construct a singular ethics directly rooted in aesthetics. Therefore we have bodies as *axis mundi*.

Sabino⁴¹ points that

[...] this process has led individuals and groups of certain social extracts to seek some physical perfection – obviously unattainable – rooted in the proliferation of images, therapeutic ideologies, miraculous methods and consumerism of products from the chemical-pharmaceutical industry such as steroids and dietary supplements, as well as vitamins and “fortificants” of the most varied types (p. 14).

The concern not only with appearance but also physical shape – with muscular marks made by iron equipment at gyms, sweat, exercises, pain, diets and even plastic surgeries –, despite being collectively produced, becomes loaded with individual investments. Famous men and women^{ff} announce in the press and on television programs the bodily transformations they have decided to undertake by means of resources such as personal trainers, nutritionists, plastic surgeons and other rejuvenation, beautification and health professionals – currently understood as “fitness.”⁴¹

Talking about these questions, two Physical Education students said:

[...] Having a healthy body is not the same as being healthy.

Yeah... and some body that I don't say is healthy, I mean, more boldly to be aesthetically healthy in the eyes of others and of oneself because as for being healthy indeed sometimes we see that it is not, you see? You see that there are a lot of people around, as we have already talked about here, who smoke, drink and are skinny...

In fact, there is even some people who, like, are not healthy, they don't have health. They have some body aiming at what is imposed by the media but at the moment it is not healthy [...]. He is, I think, devoid of vitamins because he only focuses on carbohydrates, proteins, these things [...]. All in him is extremely... He will not eat any fruit because he knows that fruits have no sugar that he does not... He is restricting his diet and is not very fond of ingesting...

It is true. This concept is very difficult, right? To answer this... It's very complex because health, folks, it's very difficult...

f Some newly muscular entertainers, providing tips on physical fitness, food and supplementation on social networks and blogs (as well as those who have gained fame through “before” and “after” images – the *before* being a body with a considerable percentage of fat and the *after* a body with defined and startling muscles, as well as low adiposity), cause many Physical Education trainers, nutritionists and students of these courses to be discontented and worried about the possibility of individuals following to the letter – against the Principle of Biological Individuality – diets and trainings revealed in social networks. Another point that also raises controversy is how these “good-shape models” – so to speak – get paid after conquering a certain number of followers (each with at least 100,000 followers, some even surpassing 500,000) in their social networks, just by posting some new photo on their pages promoting some particular brand or product. Some amounts exceed BRL 5 thousand per photo.⁸³

In this context, the body is facing a growing market that has it as main product and producer. “Being *in* and *maintaining* body shape can mean, in this collective set flow, personal success, discipline and talent to win, climbing the levels of social hierarchy” (p. 14).⁴¹ Health becomes a commandment with a normalizing effect and acquires characteristics of a utopia, understood as a project that surpasses, by its almost religious nature – given its universalist character –, ideology.⁷⁹ Although it claims universality, it is recognized by the theorists as a particular discourse, that is, a discourse originating from a specific part of society and therefore it is partial discourse. In the case of corporal practices primarily linked to the aesthetic paradigm, such utopia is crossed by representations of beauty anchored in the individualistic values of contemporary culture.⁴¹

Thus, more than medical rationality and its models (normality-pathology or vitality-energy), it is the *aesthetic* one the major socio-cultural criterion of the subject’s framing to determine if they are really “healthy,” or if they need to exercise some “health activity,” by establishing rigid patterns of physical shape. In this case, restraint, temperance, taken as health commandments, are more connected to the body’s good shape than to the disease/prevention model.⁸⁰

What is healthy or *normal* is seen, according to Canguilhem’s⁸¹ perception, as a social variation and not only as a statistical average with a biological fact, a result of the normative activity of the organism in relation to its environment. Man is healthy only when he is fit for the rules. The cure, however, does not necessarily imply full health, within this perspective. A healthy normal man would have to feel capable of continually reestablishing his health, this one always being sought, which, paradoxically, would shape a new pathology, the *pathology of perfect health*.^{81,82}

In line with this concept, Novaes & Vilhena (p. 30)⁶³ state that “being thin is made positive in any context, discourse or medium of sociability. Being lean is the best capital. Therefore, the best form of social inclusion and, finally, the most effective exchange currency.” For the authors, in the present day, being thin is an adjective of beauty. This ideal is constant and marks an insatiable quest for perfection, that is, by the acceptance of the subject’s interior and/or exterior:

[...] Even in the absence of any excess weight or in the presence of some physique that perfectly corresponds to the model valued, the female population is subject to regulation and vigilance – be them self imposed or coming from outside – in order not to distance themselves from the ideal or to ensure continuity of the endless image issue (p. 129).⁵⁰

As for the Physical Education students, we have noticed that the body with defined and hypertrophied muscles⁸⁸ is some reason for prestige. It is some value worshiped in the industry,

g Defining the musculature does not only mean to make it grow (hypertrophy) but also to reduce the percentage of body fat so that muscle fibers become visible.⁴¹

being a symbol of distinction, especially for those who train at gyms.⁸³ It is observed then that a “fashionable body” is one of the major symbols of insertion. It is in the body that are imprinted the marks that *distinguish* it, both culturally and socially, through its adornments and symbols. “On the stage of culture, at the mercy of its signs, the body goes beyond the limits of what is biological – its mechanical version – and becomes a social character/actor, appropriating its symbolic apparatus” (p. 10).⁶³ According to the authors, “the current culture praises that we be well in order to maximally expose the body. Nowadays, a muscular arm is much more valuable than expensive clothes.” (p. 11).

The search for an ideal body associated with beauty and thinness stems from innumerable influences and its consequences are not the least. The amount of images and literature on the subject shows a single model of beauty, generating constant dissatisfaction about the body, which in turn is the result of numerous diseases, such as anxiety and depression, as well as several practices that place health at risk. It is also the case of diseases such as anorexia and bulimia, eating disorders related to an excessive concern with the body. In addition, this excessive preoccupation with the body “is no less associated with eating practices and potentially harmful physical activities such as the yo-yo effect (alternating and repetitive weight loss and gain) and various weight loss unhealthy practices” (p. 204).⁸⁴

In this way, bodybuilding gyms “emerge as shape production plants, manufacturing bodies to be consumed by the logic of the market” (p. 145).²³ Thus, these environments, with their prescriptions of chemical substances – food supplements and steroid hormones and anabolic-androgenic steroids (AAS) – and their set of increasingly developed and computerized machines, operate as some kind of body factory. There are, in these disciplinary institutions, a true assembly line of shape, in which the individual is coupled to the machines and driven to experiment with all kinds of chemical innovations to shape their muscle mass. The term *mass*, much used by bodybuilders, refers directly to this reifying dimension of the world of work. Something shapeless about which scientific reason is concerned by executing its goals of aesthetic compliance.⁴¹

Mass is a recurring category in the daily life of Physical Education students and bodybuilders. Acquisition of muscle mass equals the acquisition of some good, a biological capital that must be invested, clothed in meaning through a classificatory process that gives value and meaning to that initially indistinct muscular content. This meaning is produced through the development of a system of collective representations that can be understood by the analysis of the advertisement directed towards this specific audience.⁴¹

Sabino⁴¹ complements:

To work out it is necessary to have time and a reasonable amount of money to invest in appearance. This one emerges as some kind of showcase where the supposed individual virtues are presented to an eventual “consumer audience” that can bring both economic and symbolic profit. The logic of business management takes care of the individual everyday lives, managing these in a process of personal marketing that ends up turning the existence into a thing, in a new way of treating the body and life. Body-object, body-spectacle, body-capital to be invested on, “body-coat of arms, the symbol of belonging, an effigy turned into a sign” [...] of a class, a lifestyle, an ethos. This process of attempting to transform the world into a great middle class, a great middle ground, is the corollary of Americanization – or at least the local interpretation of culture and symbols placed under the American umbrella –, of the *modus vivendi* of much of the present West which is peculiar to the rising middle class of the Brazilian coast that dreams of becoming a replica of (American cities) Miami or Los Angeles (p. 247).

Working out the body is investing one’s life in rites of passage. One can not but highlight that the expression to work out (in Portuguese, *malhar*, which means forge, as in forging iron) refers to the idea of punishing, hitting, wearing someone or something. Dutch-German-French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep⁸⁵ has concluded that most of the rites analyzed would follow some sequence including “separation,” “transition,” and “incorporation.” For the individual who is a layperson to become a priest, they must perform ceremonies, that is, acts of a special genre with a pre-established mental orientation. Between the profane world and the sacred world, there is an incompatibility, to such an extent that the passage from one to the other can not be carried out without rites of passage. In the same way it happens with Physical Education and Nutrition students who begin to work out to acquire the image of Physical Education or nutritionist professionals. If they do not work out, they have no professional status in the industry.

Turner⁸⁶ also states that rites of passage allow a transition between states, that is, the transition from one condition to another. The author himself cites professions and occupations as examples. The rite of passage initial phase involves undergraduate students’ separation and withdrawal from individuals or groups who do not seek or do not have a hegemonic body image. The final phase, in turn, is the one in which students are in a stable condition, by virtue of which they have rights and obligations of a clearly defined structural type and they are expected to behave according to certain customary rules and certain ethical standards. In Bourdieu’s⁸⁷ language, it would be the moment when they become a conservation agent in the field.

In this way, gyms take on the role of true body factories and workshops. The production process of a *healthy* body can be classified in a gradation that goes from the raw material (the body in its natural state) through the investment (of chemicals and adaptations to the exercise machines) to the final product (a gleaming, muscular and “healthy” body), invested with magic and power provided by the totem classifications of the world of *marombeiros*^{h,41}

These tastes reiterate some social distinction,⁸⁸ translating into external signs, the body being an element of prestige, that is, *physical appearance* as a sign of distinction par excellence of the groups in this research. In this body-building process of distinction, rigid and obvious muscles coupled with a low fat percentage takes on a sign of social distinction and power within the industry, where having the body disciplined by machines and physical exercises (and in some cases, food supplements) is different from having a handyman’s body.⁸⁹

This systematic and methodical character of constantly being subjected to the scrutiny of the tape measure and the mirror – in a process that “demands an ascetic, rational and individualistic conduct” (p. 174)²³ – is similar to that analyzed by Max Weber⁹⁰ in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

Weber⁹⁰ states that Catholicism would hamper the development and economic prosperity by condemning profit, while Protestantism would value meritocracy and work as spiritual blessings and wealth-producing. Thus, the author emphasized the intramundane ascesis as a change of manners, behaviors and thoughts of men which allowed the emergence of industrial capitalism. Using an analogy-type logical reasoning, it is possible to state that entering in the field of Physical Education and Nutrition as an undergraduate and a future professional is the moment of encountering a set of practices and discourses that reiterate the intramundane ascesis through the construction of an ideal body image. It is what Andrieu^{91,92} calls *bioascese*.

h *Marombeiro*, in the city of Rio de Janeiro, has become synonymous with frequent attendance of bodybuilding gyms, the same as “gym rat.” This word originates from *maromba*, a stick used by acrobats to balance on the *maroma*, the rope on which they walk. *Maromba* can also mean the weight – *quilagem* (from kilogram) or external load, to name a few synonyms – with which the equilibrist remains in equilibrium. As in strength training or Local Muscular Endurance (LME) bars with removable or unremovable weights are used at the extremities, we can similarly associate the images of a person walking on a tightrope using the *maromba* weight to balance with people using weights to optimize fitness and muscle strength.^{23,41} Novaes and Vilhena⁶³ have pointed out that the term *malhar* (to work out, here) is not used randomly. “*Malhar* (forging) as if forging hot iron...” (p. 27). According to the authors, it is not for nothing the deep tyranny with which they treat their bodies, depriving from food, mortifying them and subjecting them to torturing physical exercises. It should be emphasized that the term “*malhar*” has become obsolete at gyms in Rio de Janeiro, where the word “training” currently has a more significant symbolic value. As the language changes, one hears a lot more “I am going to *train*” (which capitalizes the subjects’ speech and therefore the subjects themselves) than the once so repeated and valued “I am going to work out.” It is worth mentioning that bodybuilding has acquired such a prominent dimension in modern culture that Courtine (p. 82)⁹⁸ goes so far as to say that the *marombeiro* “does not walk, they lead their body by displaying it as an imposing object.”

Final thoughts

This research has allowed to perceive the imposition coming from a social representation of bodies in the contemporaneity, widely diffused in the media, regarding bodies worked by bodybuilding and diet. In this context, undergraduates in Physical Education and Nutrition should be responsible for the practice of good eating habits and a healthier lifestyle and should show, in the image of their bodies, a healthy appearance.

It is not an imprisonment of the subject only in the body, but to tape measures, gyms, beauty products and plastic surgeries. Imprisonment in a social model socially reproduced as ideal and hegemonic. For some authors, this is called “blaming” or “accountability” of the subject in a society that transfers to the subject the rigid commitment to maintain a standard of health and good shape, excluding the value of health determinants.^{93,94}

For Lechopier,⁹⁵ since the 1950s the dominant scientific approaches to public health have consisted in the identification of risk factors. This approach of the risk factor has been criticized for its lack of social view of population phenomena. Critical social sciences challenge the foundations and ideology of public health. There are critical studies by various anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and philosophers, but many continue to draw inspiration from Foucault’s biopower analysis.^{12,14,96}

Thus, not only health policies inserted in macro-political and macroeconomic contexts but daily practices and discourses have been studied and criticized as modes of subjectivization, control and domination. Mesh of power acts to capture, guide, determine, intercept, model, control and ensure gestures, behaviors, opinions and speeches from living beings. This becomes evident in students of health, especially those studied by us, revealing a discourse in the logic of a power mechanism producing subjectivities embodied in the glory of muscular and thin bodies.

What we have to think about is not the existence of some pattern but the way these young people are coping when they can not comply with it. Being fat or thin, blond or brunette, tall or short, having straight or curly hair are characteristics that are part of the same society.

We have thus seen Physical Education and Nutrition as two pillars of this reflection, being often the agents of the health area, actors who reproduce the image of bodies socially worshiped as ideal: free from fat and with muscles sculpturally built. In the cases observed it is possible to perceive a strong social representation regarding behavior and the predominant body model among the students of both areas, indicating in many moments a well structured and incisive discourse about those who escape the hegemonic pattern. It is also possible to perceive some value judgment that stigmatizes deviant patterns and values practices that potentiate corporal aspects in levels that, even outside normal conditions of muscular hypertrophy and fat, often present aesthetics as some differentiated social status and above health questions.

It is worth noting if these social representations about bodies in these subject matters are a reflection of the social imaginarieness that has been widely shared in the media and reaches streets, gyms and beaches, and to what extent these professionals' performance (and training) is inserted in the production of such socially structured patterns. This translates into the need to work through undergraduate education the meanings and symbolisms of bodies and the relationship with this ideal of primacy of beauty as something standardized.

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