Body practices and Brazilian culture: pedagogical contributions to physical education professionals

Ítalo Matheus Maligere de Souza\textsuperscript{a}, Cinthia Lopes da Silva\textsuperscript{b*}

\textsuperscript{a}Methodist University of Piracicaba, Rodovia do Açúcar km 156, Piracicaba – SP, 13.423-170, Brazil
\textsuperscript{b}Methodist University of Piracicaba, Rodovia do Açúcar km 156, Piracicaba – SP, 13.423-170, Brazil

Abstract

This work aims to analyze: 1) body practices, in particular the sport, and their relationships with Brazilian culture, 2) generate theoretical elements for physical education professionals to have an effective pedagogical action. The methodological procedure consisted of a qualitative bibliography research. As a result, we identified that it is fundamental for Physical Education professionals, working in schools and leisure places, to perform pedagogical actions that make possible for the subjects to gain access to systematized knowledge, so that they can understand the meanings attributed to body practices that circulate in Brazil.

Keywords: Body practices; Media; Culture; Leisure; Physical Education; Pedagogical action.

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, the media is essential in the process of spreading the messages and meanings attributed to body practices. Its information reaches various regions and social groups. On the other hand, individuals, as social beings, have the potential to produce multiple meanings. During their social lives, they go through a process of building their identities, which occurs based on their relationships with society. This process can lead them to disprove of, accept, or oppose information spread by the media. Thus, we can believe that body practices (sports, martial arts, dance, gymnastics etc.) are understood in a certain way in Brazilian culture. During this process, we determined that pedagogical action regarding body practices is fundamental to allowing various subjects access to

\*Corresponding author. Tel: 5519981293565
E-mail address: cinthialsilva@uol.com.br
knowledge so that they can evaluate the values and meanings attributed to such practices.

For the development of the text, we initially present the methodological research procedures. Then, we present the search results and discussion, which are divided into two parts: 1) Body practices and their relationships with Brazilian culture and 2) Body practices and pedagogical contributions to physical education professionals. Finally, we summarize the conclusions of the investigation.

2. Method

We conducted bibliographic research at the library of Methodist University of Piracicaba (UNIMEP), using Academic Google and the Scielo database. The bibliographic research was performed using the following keywords: Body Practices, Sport, Culture, Leisure, Physical Education and Pedagogical action.

A literature review was used as the methodological procedure. This type of analysis corresponds to qualitative research. For Minayo (1994, p. 21-2), this type of research:

(...) answers very particular questions. She cares, in the social sciences, about the level of reality that cannot be qualified. In other words, she works with the universe of signifiers, motifs, aspirations, beliefs, values, and attitudes, which correspond to a deeper space of relationships, the processes and phenomena that cannot be reduced to the operationalization of variables.

Regarding the treatment given to the books that served as references for this paper, our reading, analysis, and text interpretation were in accordance with Severino (2007):

- The textual analysis consisted of finding information about the author of the text and verifying the vocabulary and historical facts presented by the text in the hope of identifying the scheme of the text so that it is possible to obtain a better view of the whole.
- We performed thematic analysis, which was the act of listening and “capturing” the author, without interference in his or her message, by asking the text a series of questions. The answers to these questions provide us with the content of his or her message.
- We performed interpretative analysis, in which we attempted to understand the ideas presented by the author interpretively. By performing this type of analysis, it is also possible to understand the ideas critically, i.e., in terms of the creation of a critical judgment or the taking of a particular position.
- The problematization approach, which is a type of approach that leads to problems, will also be discussed.
- The fifth and final step involves a personal summary, a logical writing construction that allows the scholar to make progress in developing the author’s ideas.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Body practices and their relationships with Brazilian culture

Body practices are part of the physical culture of a society; they involve men and women in movement, their gestures, and their way of expressing themselves physically. There are two fundamental types of body practices: western, such as gymnastics, sports, and walking, and eastern, such as tai-chi, yoga, the martial arts, etc. (Carvalho, 2006). By studying body practices and their relations with Brazilian culture¹, we may understand the meanings attributed to body practices in Brazilian context.

¹ According to Geertz (1989) culture is webs of meanings that human beings have woven and their analysis.
Bauman (2008) points out that one benefit of our modern society is that it offers people the opportunity to be happy in the present life, not in heaven, as it did in the past. According to the author, our society cannot bear the idea of unhappiness, and he considers our reality to be a sadly standardized one.

In a certain way, when choosing this discourse, we move in the direction of sameness, in which our behaviors and way of life are strongly influenced by the market, the media, and consumption. As Bauman (2008) affirms, people who do not fit into a certain pattern can be excluded. The recent increase of the number of plastic surgeries is important and should be understood as one of the consequences of social pressures in our modern context. Plastic surgeries are the result of the technical and scientific improvements of the last century, but during that century, they were typically only used in extreme cases because of the high risks. Today, plastic surgery is about money and desire. Many times, it is observed that:

Plastic surgery is not to remove a scar or reach an ideal form that was denied by nature or destiny, but it is about being updated to match trends that change quickly, keeping one’s own value in the market and disposing of an image that has lost its use and its charm in such a manner that a new public image takes its place (Bauman, 2008, p. 133).

Plastic surgery has become an attractive method for people who want to have “perfect” bodies quickly. However, although cosmetic surgery can give people instant results, it is dangerous, sometimes even leading to death.

In the debate over body practices, we cannot ignore the influence that the media has and its relationship with society. We do not intend to disregard what is called the cultural industry, with its discourse that exalts the beauty of the perfect body, with its perfect measurements and perfect weight. Accordingly, we realize that the media propagates the notion that physical exercise is the way for people reach the ideal body model shown everywhere. This type of ideology regarding physical beauty has many negative aspects, such as the creation of stereotypes. Those people who fit the ideal standard are given positive labels, and on the other hand, those who, for whatever reason, do not have ideal bodies are characterized negatively.

In the contemporary scenario, there is a cult of the body, which most of the population supports by seeking the ideal of corporeal beauty or trying to fit themselves to the body models shown by the media. People do this in an attempt to avoid being negatively stereotyped. Thus, many people play sports, go to the gym two or three times per week, or even exercise on their own in squares or parks. In these ways, they engage in physical exercise.

We should not stop exercising simply because exercise is being used in the discourse of the cultural industry. Such body practices are one manner in which people use their free time; they often develop their social and personal skills in this way. Moreover, the fact that certain body practices are spread by the media does not mean that they do not have their benefits. Exercise aids in the creation of identities, helps establish social links, and does not necessarily indicate that a given individual supports the discourse of the media.

For many people – who consciously or not are guided by the media discourse – exercise has become an obligation. Thus, it is one of many body practices. According to Damiani and Silva (2005), this is a problem because as body practices become consumable products as we can observe in the Brazilian context, they lose some of their symbolic value; those people who practice them are doing so to fit themselves to body models rather than have access to the practice itself. Moreover, the generalized reasons for and meanings of body practices are spread by the cultural industry. In the words of the authors above,

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2 Based on Adorno’s ideas (1986), we can understand that the term “cultural industry” indicates the social process of transforming popular culture and art into a product to be consumed.

3 The concept of physical activity is associated with energy loss and calorie intake. There is an agreement among various health professionals that physical activity is essential in preventing and controlling chronic diseases such as heart and respiratory diseases, diabetes, obesity, and cancer. Physical exercise should be understood as a subgroup of physical activities that implies the planned repetition of a particular movement or group of movements with the objective of improving or maintaining fitness (Carvalho, 2006).
Statistical data and standardized measures are being processed by professionals in various places and contexts, indicating a tendency toward globalization that is overwhelming cultural diversity by using science. Accordingly, science, as a form of merchandise fetishism, may become the new myth in this contemporary context (Damiani & Silva, 2005, p. 55).

Giovanni (2005) attempted to understand the way in which body practices have entered the consumption universe, thus constituting a sector of products and services. To him, in the last decades, there has been an increase in the role of sports in contemporary life. It is not rare to see businesses that invest money in clubs and sports associations to encourage body practices. In the author’s own words,

In this context, there is an integration of the economic construction of the market with values related to bodily activity. The athlete (professional) has the function of model from the perspective of values related to the body (personalization) because he or she has experienced increased social status through the institutionalized use of the body (Giovanni, 2005, p. 170).

However, it is important to understand this cultural industry – which greatly affects body practices and sports – not as something delimited but as an effect of the way society socially and economically organizes itself. Capitalist production, together with liberal political measures, creates a culture of competition among citizens. They must always try to have the best and be the best in accordance with the model imposed by the cultural industry.

Soares (2005) signals that we are indoctrinated into this standardization very early in life. We can verify this by examining schools, which are understood by many scholars as micro-societies. The most common body practices in Brazilian school culture are football, handball, basketball, and volleyball. These practices tell us much about society because on and off the court, there is pressure to win. The most efficient way of obtaining victory off the court and having the privileges of being a winner is by transforming life into a business. In this business, everyone wants to enjoy the glories of success by being the best. The search for outstanding performance results, according to Soares (2005), in a cult of performance. For the author, the background of this cult is competition. The drive to be the best makes society ever more competitive, transforming the other into a rival. According to the author,

The **cult of performance**, as a rule of life, creates the perfect synthesis of competition and consumption, which is constructed from the idea of **fair play** provided by sports competition and **consumption** as a form of personal realization. Life is, in fact, a company! (Soares, 2005, p. 48).

This interpretation that there is only space for the best in society applies to beauty as well. After all, there is a model of beauty, an idea regarding how tall we should be and how many kilos we should weigh. The best individual must be attractive; he or she must have an adequate body based on the standards of society. Thus, a simple walk is now a physical activity. Whereas we considered the path we walked before, our eyes only see the changing of the numbers on the pedometer now. Moreover, to be the best, one cannot waste time with gestures or practices that will not result in some benefit. They should not be performed even if they give some pleasure.

The notion that the perfect body can be obtained through the practice of sports is spread via the idea that “Sport is health”, as we can observe in Brazilian culture. Melo (2001) attempted to determine when sports became associated with a healthy life. According to him, sports were introduced in Rio de Janeiro around the 19th century with the creation of a “running club” in 1849, in which the body practice was horse riding. This means that the practice was different from that of today because the physical effort was made more by the horse than the man. In the last fifteen years of the 19th century and the beginning of 20th century, sanitation became more prevalent. According to Melo (2001), this had an effect on some of the rowing clubs in Rio de Janeiro. At that time, the

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4 One example of these sanitation measures was the Vaccine Rebellion. See Sevenko (1993).
practice of sports was a trend in Rio de Janeiro, and taking advantage of this, the directors of rowing clubs began the process of reframing them, pointing out the benefits of the practice for the population. During that time, based on positivist theories, the atmosphere of the capital of Brazil became focused on progress, and this, in Melos’s words (2001), “depended on healthy individuals, physically and morally”.

Considering body practices to have meanings and significations for those people who practice them enlarges the possibilities of studying society and its interactions with the individual. It allows us to focus on new objects of analysis that were disregarded before. For example, we can briefly examine the importance of football in Brazil. This body practice is appreciated and practiced universally, but in Brazil, it has particularities, not only in the money it brings but also in the meaning associated to it. During the military dictatorship (1964-1984), the government used this sport to obtain popular support. Thus, football served as a political instrument.

One of the primary concerns of the military leaders who were in power was to transform Brazil into a great power. With the objective of creating an “economic miracle”, the military leaders borrowed foreign money, invested in industry, and “made political propaganda in the form TV advertisements that linked the ‘economic miracle’ with the presumed positive features of Brazilians and the actions of the dictatorial government” (FICO, 2001, p. 181). Investing in the image of a great Brazil, entrepreneurs, who were then in the hands of the military leaders, could finally move forward. At the same time, football was established as the most popular sport among Brazilians, and the national team twice won the world championship; it was considered the best in the world. Since the beginning of the military regime, the parallel between football and the power of the Brazilian nation was drawn: “at that point, there was the total belief that Brazil, this huge country that was now in good hands, could be the leader of the first world because it already had the best football team on the planet” (Guterman, 2009, p. 153).

Seeking legitimation and approval from the Brazilian population, the dictatorship used football as an important tool to move the masses and integrate the national community. In the World Cup of 1966, a great deal of money was invested in publicity for the football team, who would certainly come back home as winners. According to Marcos Guterman, the 1966 World Cup was filled with optimism. The entire nation was sure of victory, but the pressure on the players may have caused their shameful defeat.

Although they were defeated, the relationship between football and the Brazilian essence was already cemented because of the great publicity of the team during the World Cup. Using this example, we can show how important body practices are for society.

Investigating body practices allows us to inquire into actions and activities that, at first glance, seem to have only the meanings that the media gives them. However, when we pay more attention and approach them not only as simply physical activities but also as a way of manifesting a particular society’s values, we can note that they are as complex as any other type of human manifestation. It is interesting to subject this complexity to analysis because it allows us to break away from consolidated forms of thinking, such as common sense, for example, the notion that a particular body practice, such as lifting weights, has only corporeal-esthetic meaning. Thus, not everything is as it seems. To be more specific, not everything has the meanings that are attributed to it by the media and/or common sense.

3.2 Body practices and pedagogical contributions to physical education professionals

Pedagogical actions performed in schools and leisure places allow individuals access to knowledge and allow them to attribute new meanings to body practices. Thus, they gain the capacity to intervene in, reflect upon, and review the influence of the media, which is widespread in contemporary societies.

Rodrigues Júnior and Silva (2008, p.171), based on the work of Geertz (2003) and Bakhtin (1999), state that the classroom is a privileged space for meeting and the confrontation of knowledge by teachers and students:

The confrontation of knowledge indicates that the classroom is a space for collective construction between students and teachers; it can also be understood as a place of necessary tension that destabilizes the knowledge of common sense and allows the construction of “something new” that is produced from the inter-relationship among the subjects.
Implicit knowledge, or common sense, is outlined by the “first impressions” about a particular social phenomenon. In this case, we can believe that the implicit knowledge of students in Brazilian schools is that body practices are a way of obtaining beautiful and healthy bodies. Also, the fact that students feel moved to support a specific football team shows a logical orientation toward the consumption of products created by the cultural industry.

Another reference we have as a basis for considering pedagogical behavior is the presuppositions of Freire (2005) about education for freedom. When saying a word, a human being transforms the world because, according to Freire (2005, p. 91), “(...) the dialogue imposes itself as a way in which men, as men, obtain meaning.” From this perspective, dialogue is seen as an existential demand, a meeting at which reflection and action are brought together with the intention of transforming and humanizing the world.

The author, when defending an education for freedom, makes a counterpoint to the view of “banking education.” In doing so, he is moved by the fundamental relationship between narrator and speakers. This type of relationship implies a narration by a subject – the narrator – and the patient objects, listeners – those being educated.

The educator, in the vision of “banking education”, is an agent and a subject, and his task, according to Freire (2005), is to “fill up’ the students with contents from his narration, contents that are cut into pieces and disconnected from the totality from which they come” (p.65-6).

Instead of communicating, the educator makes “communications,” deposits that students memorize and repeat (Freire, 2005). This view of education implies pedagogical behavior that favors the acceptance of the system in which we live and capitalist society, instead of potentiating subjects to produce multiple meanings so that they make choices, increase their reading of the world, and transform their realities. In these terms, “banking education” feeds the contradiction that exists in capitalist society.

Freire’s ideas (2005) about education for freedom and Rodrigues Júnior and Lopes Silva’s (2008) ideas about the classroom are references to considering pedagogical behavior with regard to students in elementary schools. They also consider the influence of the media on contemporary society through the spreading of body practices. It should be clear that those authors give us bases for action. They allow us to consider the influence of the media in the sense that it transforms the information within knowledge. Thus, we do not have the intention of excluding or not considering the discourses presented by the media. Rather, we should provide subjects with the ability to reflect upon and question such discourses.

4. Conclusions

We finish our explanation with the conclusion that body practices are spread by the media as consumable products; the subjects have the potential to bring new meanings to the images and information produced by the media and the schools and leisure places are essential to achieve this goal. It is evident that it is from such institutions that many individuals constitute their knowledge of society. In other words, common sense arises due to media discourse. According to Rodrigues Júnior and Silva (2008, p.160), “common sense allow people to structure their ways of thinking, planning, visualizing, and understanding the world around them and the reality they belong to” This constitutes their immediate view, and it can fulfill their daily needs.

The actions of physical education professionals in schools and leisure places are essential because they will permit social groups to have access to other models via which to understand society. Finally, it is through the educational process that the subjects will gain access to systematized knowledge of body practices and thus be able understand the meanings attributed to body practices that circulate in Brazil and to attribute new meanings to them.

The objective of this study was to produce theoretical bases via which to construct pedagogical action, thus giving individuals access to knowledge about body practices. This will allow them to consider the influences of the cultural industry/media – which exist in the form of common sense – as well as the meanings attributed to such practices by the individuals. The construction of a pedagogical action requires the theoretical support given by a teacher. After all, we must establish effective knowledge construction results so that teachers can, together with students, confront the many views and understandings of the world.

The work carried out above privileged the Brazilian context in order to develop reflections about body practices. However, other studies related to sports, gymnastics, martial arts, dance, and body practices in general in various realities and cultural contexts could contribute to physical education. These different realities have particularities that can constitute new elements and references for the construction of pedagogical action in the field of physical education and leisure.
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