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PHYSICAL EDUCATION, SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BODY IN ADOLESCENCE AND FATPHOBIC BULLYING

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ABSTRACT

This article is an excerpt from a dissertation for the Master's Degree in Education and Culture at the Federal University of Pará, whose objective is to investigate the relationship between the social representation of the body and fatphobic bullying in Physical Education classes at the Rui Barbosa School in Tucuruí-PA. Obesity rates in children and adolescents have increased significantly and this makes us think that this public needs attention and care at school, since it is there that they spend part of their time and end up suffering from some prejudices. This is a research with a qualitative approach that aims to understand the subjective side of the object of study, analyzed from individual experiences, through semi-structured interviews, carried out with students from the school. According to the authors cited in the research, such as Merleau-Ponty (1992) and Moscovici (2003), society imposes beauty standards, resulting in the imperative of conforming human beings to these standards, and this directly affects the development of adolescents who do not conform to them. It is understood that there is a need to make the school curriculum more flexible to bodily differences, so education needs to be rethought, as prejudice and discrimination at school negatively affect the learning and development of these students.

Keywords: Fatphobic bullying. Physical education. Social Representation.

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INTRODUCTION

The present research is based on the first experiences with the internship in the Physical Education Course, where we could observe that most teachers are guided by understandings that value the cult of the body and the selection of agile and talented students for the sport. Not all students participate in practical classes, some because they are embarrassed to expose themselves or lack of skills and others because they are excluded by classmates or even by the teachers themselves. Competitive Physical Education is still very present in classes, that is, many teachers focus on competition, sports training and winning medals as a promotion of schools. This ends up excluding the less skilled students and what was supposed to be a class for everyone ends up becoming a kind of preparatory school for small sports groups.

Genetics, diversity and biotype are very important factors for the Physical Education class, but they end up being disregarded even by the teachers of the discipline who see the fat student as incapable and unproductive in the practice of certain modalities. This type of behavior shows that the current ideology is linked to body standards, disregarding differences.

This research presents some experiences lived by students who are victims of *bullying*, more specifically fatphobic *bullying* and the types of violence resulting from these practices in the Physical Education classes of the Rui Barbosa School. We also explain the relationship between fatphobic bullying, which can also be called fatphobia here, and the social representation of the body. The objective of this study is to investigate the influence of fatphobic bullying on the learning and school development of students who consider themselves victims of this practice.

The study uses as a theoretical basis the Theory of Social Representations, developed by Serge Moscovici, in addition to the conceptions of the body of Merleau-Ponty (1992), Ramos (2019), and other authors who discuss topics related to Physical Education, *bullying*, fatphobia and violence in the classroom. The approach used is qualitative, seeking to understand the subjective side of the object of study through semi-structured interviews with students from the Rui Barbosa School, in Tucuruí-PA, through intensive direct observation, which allows the examination of the facts and phenomena related to the theme studied.

THE BODY, FATPHOBIA AND *FATPHOBIC* BULLYING

The trajectory of the experience and understanding of the human body follows the cultural conceptions that change throughout the history of civilizations, with each society

and culture shaping the body, valuing different characteristics and emphasizing certain attributes to the detriment of others, establishing its own ideals. In this way, standards of beauty, sensuality, health and posture emerge, which provide guidelines for the construction of body and sexual identities. Over time, these models have shaped the body narrative, serving as instruments for coding meaning and driving the history of the body, as noted by Barbosa, Matos and Costa (2011).

The body is idealized, molded, and enhanced through training, indicating that it is not simply a product of nature, but rather, created in a society. According to Merleau-Ponty (1992), we live in a time that can be considered the "civilization of shame", as opposed to the Judeo-Christian view, characterized as the "civilization of guilt". Thus, the ideal image corresponds to the concept of citizenship, encouraging individuals to try to achieve it through shaping and improving the body through exercise and diet. The body is, according to the same author, considered an element of glorification and interest of the State.

When society sees the thin body as the ideal body, prejudice arises against bodies that do not fit this standard and this ends up creating space for the emergence of *bullying* and fatphobia. According to Ramos (2019), by recognizing that the construction of identities is shaped by interrelationships, it becomes evident that fatphobic behaviors contribute to processes of selectivity and rejection of fat individuals who do not fit the standards established by the dominant group.

After all, how could we define this term fatphobia? It is important to note that, despite being under constant discussion among researchers and scholars in the field, this term is not included in the official dictionary. In this way, we will address the definitions of some authors to better understand this topic. According to Araújo (2017), fatphobia is a system that oppresses fat bodies, stigmatizes, devalues and harasses them through social, media, cultural and medical agents, establishing acceptable and valued body standards.

For Noronha and Deufel (2014), fatphobia is a manifestation of discomfort or indignation when someone comes across fat people who do not fit the predominant aesthetic standards, often resulting in forms of verbal, moral, psychological or physical violence. It can be considered that among these forms of violence, the most common is verbal violence, after all, many people do not know what fatphobia is and end up using expressions that depreciate the fat body without understanding the consequences of this. We have as an example the expression "making fat", a phrase that brings us to the idea that the fat person only does wrong things or bad things, that his attitudes are linked to the shape of his body.

In schools there are many nicknames attached to fat students, such as "whale", "ball", "well stopper", among others. These terms should not be ignored and seen as child's play, they should not be used to make jokes about anyone's body type. Some scholars have even coined the term "fatphobic bullying" to refer to the frequent aggressions suffered by fat students in school settings.

Talking specifically about "fatphobic bullying", Ramos (2019) conceptualizes it from the combination of *bullying* + fatphobia, using it to describe the systematic aggressions often directed at people with fat bodies in school environments, since the phenomenon of *bullying* It is especially prevalent in these learning spaces. This negative view of the fat body is something trivialized in our society, and the school is a space where this type of prejudice is noticeable. This fact can be proven through offensive behaviors, directed at those students considered fat or "overweight" in the school routine.

Silva *et al.* (2018) emphasize that this occurs when individuals adopt images of bodies that are sold to them as the ideal of perfection, thin and white, emphasizing that social visions are constructed from classes, races and genders, where the standard of beauty is usually Eurocentric and exclusive. This dynamic implies significant damage to the educational processes of this public, causing serious problems in their development and permanence in school environments and, in this way, opens space for school dropout.

It is important to emphasize the differences between fatphobic bullying and fatphobia, distinguished by the fact that fatphobic bullying occurs in the school environment in a systematic and frequent way, with constant variations in the forms of violence practiced. These variations end up causing emotional and psychological exhaustion in the victims, keeping them in a constant state of pain and suffering, and this scenario contributes to low school performance and even to school dropout, which can result in irreversible trauma and, in more serious cases, lead to self-injurious behaviors or suicide attempts. warn Silvestre, Soares and Sabota (2020). According to Ramos (2019), fatphobic bullying further aggravates the vulnerability of students who are victims of this type of violence.

Fatphobia, on the other hand, manifests itself in a more isolated way and in different contexts. In addition, fatphobia is characterized, to a large extent, by predominantly affecting women, reflecting the dynamics of a patriarchal and sexist society, in which the female body is often prejudged and objectified.

It is believed that the school, as a space intended for the comprehensive formation of individuals for full participation in society, has the responsibility to create learning opportunities both in the curriculum and in social interaction. Therefore, it is important to

integrate activities related to care and respect for the diversity of bodies. It is an important challenge for schools that they offer adequate training to deal with issues related to the phenomenon of *bullying* and fatphobic bullying. Negligence in this aspect ranges from the lack of training opportunities to the absence of professional recognition in this field (Oliveira; Mamedio, 2016).

FATPHOBIC BULLYING IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLASSES

Physical Education differs from other curricular components due to its nature that demands the exposure of the body through movement for the execution of activities in practical classes. In this context, the disparity in students' motor skills becomes evident, as there are different levels and abilities among students, greater or lesser adaptation to the ideals of the activities (Castro; Nicoletti; Cardoso, 2020).

Fatphobic bullying manifests itself, therefore, easily in the context of Physical Education classes, since this discipline, historically, has been permeated by exclusionary aesthetic standards. In this space, discrimination can occur in different forms, from more subtle attitudes to openly prejudiced behaviors. The cult of the thin body, often reinforced in sports environments, according to Santuchi *et al. (*2023), contributes to marginalizing students who do not fit this standard, resulting in exclusion and embarrassment.

According to the same authors (2023), the emphasis on physical fitness and body aesthetics, without considering the diversity of bodies and abilities, undermines the inclusive purpose of Physical Education. Thus, it is important for educators to rethink pedagogical practices, adopting approaches that promote the acceptance of body diversity and challenge the stigmas associated with fat bodies.

In relation to the pedagogical approaches currently employed in Physical Education classes, we still observe the deep-rooted presence of the competitive model in many schools. This methodology was widespread in Brazil after World War II and gained strength during the military dictatorship. From this perspective, Physical Education is restricted to sports, intensifying the practice of sports as a way to prepare young Brazilians for the Olympics, with the aim of winning medals and praising the country. Thus, a culture that prioritizes the taste for sports was consolidated, without contemplating the teaching of the discipline in its amplitude.

It is important to highlight that, from the moment that the most skilled and agile students are selected to practice physical activities — especially in sports — there is room for various forms of *bullying*, including fatphobic bullying. This situation highlights the lack

of inclusion in these classes, since adaptations are not made that consider the body diversity present in the school environment.

Corroborating this thought, Silva *et al.* (2018) emphasize that the lack of inclusion reflects an exclusionary approach and that Physical Education teachers have the challenge of correcting these disparities, implementing strategies that ensure the equitable participation of students, regardless of their body composition.

Although there are other pedagogical approaches that explore the development of the human being in its entirety through physical exercise, unfortunately what can be observed is that Physical Education is still synonymous with sport, and this often seeks the physical and technical improvement of the individual. In this way, competitiveness leaves Physical Education linked to sport, which, in Bracht's (1992) analyses, is seen as a hegemonic element of the movement's culture.

The culture that the Physical Education class can be used as a soccer school, where sports training is prioritized, is still rooted in us. In this case, the teacher becomes a coach of this sport and those chosen and most skilled students are the athletes. Following this logic, the practice of sports, which would only be a means of education through movement, ends up becoming an end in itself, and the exclusion of less skilled students and students considered fat begins to exist, bringing several negative impacts to them.

Oliveira and Mamedio (2016) suggest educational interventions focused on the multifactoriality of the condition, to prevent harmful stereotypes from emerging. They also highlight the need for an inclusive approach to physical activities, with the adaptation of exercises to meet different physical abilities, creating a more welcoming environment.

The implementation of activities that encourage the participation of everyone, regardless of physical size, is an effective means of deconstructing stereotypes. Competitions based on individual and collective skills, rather than aesthetic criteria, can contribute to a paradigm shift. In general terms, the Physical Education teacher is one of the main pieces in this whole process of fair and egalitarian learning. According to Santuchi *et al.* (2023), awareness of the influence of language, visual representation, and the evaluation of bodies in Physical Education classes is also essential to cultivate an equitable and healthy educational environment.

Physical activity in the school environment can then contribute to the development of satisfactory relationships and a healthy self-image. Physical practice can help students achieve a balance between body health and mental health, and this is only possible if the educator provides the integration between the theory and practice of the contents of

Physical Education, that is, values diverse physical abilities, in addition to fostering the experience of values such as respect and dignity of each human being.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATION

Serge Moscovici (1925 - 2014), a Romanian psychologist and sociologist who settled in France, proposed the theory of social representations in the 1960s as an innovative approach to understanding how people construct shared meanings about objects, events, and phenomena in their social environment. His theory challenges traditional conceptions of social cognition by emphasizing the dynamic and collective nature of human thought.

For Oliveira (2004), social representations play a fundamental role in understanding the cognitive and social processes that shape the individual's perception and interpretation of the world around him. This statement leads us to understand that social representations are not only reflections of the reality of individuals, but rather social constructions that arise from the interaction and coexistence between them and their cultures. The author highlights in his study the processes of anchoring and objectification, in which concepts are linked to individual experiences and, only later, objectified in a broader social context.

Although Moscovici is a great reference when it comes to social representations, he himself shows in his work that the pioneer to introduce such reflections was Émile Durkheim, however, under the name of "collective representation", indicating the distinction between social thought and individual thought. Moscovici (2003) shows that in Durkheim individual thought would be essentially a psychic phenomenon, going beyond mere brain activity. Moreover, social thought would not simply be the aggregation of individual thoughts.

Moscovici (2003) analyzes Social Representation in relation to the product, focusing on the common sense knowledge that guides interpretations and communications. In the author's view, common sense knowledge is not like a failure in relation to science, but rather a practical and true knowledge that explains specific practices, while theory emphasizes the interpretation of this knowledge, differentiating it from the scientific approach.

The study of social representations brings us a relevant concern for this study as we guide the discussions around common sense in the academic and scientific environment. Generally, common sense is viewed with suspicion or disbelief, which is very controversial, since common sense is at the center of many important discoveries of humanity.

Assuming the perspective of Serge Moscovici's Theory of Social Representations in this research implies recognizing the fundamental role of these representations in social

and practical relations, in addition to recognizing common sense as legitimate and influencing the production of scientific knowledge. The author's proposal, a meticulous and in-depth perspective based on sociological thought, allows for an enrichment of the understanding of social phenomena.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF THE BODY AND FATPHOBIA

The relationship between the social representation of the body and fatphobia is a broad and complex topic, which encompasses social, cultural and psychological dimensions. Fatphobia, defined as prejudice and discrimination against fat people, is often underpinned by social representations that reinforce negative stigmas and stereotypes. These representations are influenced by several factors, such as the media, popular culture, and the dynamics of everyday social interactions.

The media plays a central role in the perpetuation of fatphobia, especially through the representation of the fat body. Arruda and Heidemann (2022), in their analysis of the series *Orange Is The New Black*, highlight how the representation of lesbian and fat women often presents distortions that contribute to the marginalization of these identities. Despite addressing issues of diversity, the series often resorts to stereotypes that reinforce the exclusion of fat bodies from standards of femininity and social acceptance.

This negative representation is also highlighted by the study by Araújo et al. (2018), who analyzed comments from internet users about fatphobia. The authors identified that social perceptions about fat bodies are often marked by prejudice, disdain, and dehumanization. These comments often reflect stereotypes that associate fat bodies with a lack of discipline, health, or personal worth, perpetuating a discriminatory and exclusionary view. Such dynamics show how *online discourse* can serve as a space for the reproduction of fatphobia, contributing to the maintenance of social stigmas and reinforcing barriers in the acceptance and inclusion of diverse bodies.

In addition, fatphobia is deeply rooted in a culture that associates thinness with ideal standards of health and beauty. Paim (2019) highlights that this distorted perception contributes to social exclusion and to the internalization of feelings of guilt by fat people who often come to believe that their bodies are inadequate and that they do not deserve recognition.

The pressure to conform to unrealistic aesthetic standards creates a cycle of discrimination that permeates several spheres of life, including the school environment. Souza and Gonçalves (2021) emphasize that fatphobia experienced in this context negatively impacts the psychic and social development of fat students. These students

often face *bullying*, social exclusion, and lack of representation, which can lead to low self-esteem, insecurity, and difficulties in forming interpersonal bonds. In addition, the school environment, instead of being a welcoming and learning space, often reinforces stereotypes, contributing to the perpetuation of fatphobia and structural inequalities.

The psychological impacts of fatphobia are profound and long-term. Junior *et al.* (2023) and Paim (2019) point out that weight-based discrimination can generate significant self-esteem and mental health problems, establishing a vicious cycle in which the negative perception of the body is internalized and transformed into a lived reality. This internalization of stigma can lead to avoidance behaviors, including a fear of seeking medical attention or participating in social activities. Such behaviors not only further isolate fat people, but also amplify psychological and social damage, making it difficult to break this oppressive cycle.

This coercion to accept beauty standards often leads fat students to feel inadequate and excluded, which can result in a vicious cycle of psychic and social suffering. In addition, the school culture, which often perpetuates negative stereotypes about fat bodies, contributes to a hostile environment that can aggravate these problems (Souza; Gonçalves, 2021).

Fatphobia is intensified by social and cultural norms that exalt thin bodies as symbols of health and beauty, promoting the idea that fat students are less worthy of respect and consideration. This dynamic is aggravated by media representations that consolidate unattainable ideals of beauty, increasing the pressure on young people to adjust to these standards. Arruda (2021) states that this combination of factors contributes to social exclusion, the reinforcement of stereotypes, and the development of insecurities, creating barriers to emotional well-being and the acceptance of different body shapes.

The social representation of the body plays a crucial role in the formation of attitudes and behaviors in relation to fatphobic bullying, a phenomenon that intensifies in adolescence, a period marked by significant physical and psychological transformations. Dissatisfaction with body image is often fueled by beauty standards promoted by the media and society. These bodily transformations, especially during adolescence, can generate suffering and concerns about social acceptance, leading to an incessant search for an idealized body that is often unattainable, show Oliveira and Machado (2021).

This dissatisfaction with body image affects a significant portion of adolescents, including in rural areas where, although beauty norms may differ, they are influenced by the media. The pressure to conform to these standards contributes to the emergence of harmful behaviors, such as restrictive diets and excessive physical exercise. This situation is often

aggravated by bullying experiences, which reinforce body dissatisfaction and amplify the negative impacts on young people's physical and mental health (Batista et al., 2024).

Social networks play a crucial role in the construction of contemporary body image, predominantly ignoring diversity in body representations, which feeds the exclusion of individuals who do not fit the predominant beauty standards, reinforcing a cult of thinness that marginalizes bodies outside this ideal. This exclusion is intensified by the digital environment, which promotes incessant social comparisons, causing young people to feel pressured to compare themselves to unrealistic standards presented *online*. Lira et al. (2017) assert that this dynamic not only affects self-esteem, but also contributes to harmful behaviors related to body image.

To combat fatphobia effectively, it is essential to continue exploring and questioning the social representations that marginalize fat bodies. This requires the promotion of discourses that value body diversity, the implementation of public policies that prevent discrimination, and collective awareness of the damage caused by exclusionary aesthetic standards. In addition, it is crucial to encourage the media, educational institutions, and living spaces to adopt inclusive practices that respect and celebrate all body shapes, contributing to the construction of a more just, equitable, and welcoming society for all.

THE ENVIRONMENT IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLASSES

The information obtained by the field research highlights the experiences lived by pre-adolescents in the school environment, related to experiences and social representations about fatphobic bullying, as emerged in the participants' answers and reports.

The analysis explores how students from the Rui Barbosa School position themselves on the topic of fatphobia within the school environment, especially in the context of Physical Education classes, where bodies are constantly put in evidence. From the answers provided, it was possible to observe patterns that allow us to understand how this prejudice manifests itself, affects self-esteem and limits participation in the activities of this discipline.

The survey participants demonstrated a clear understanding of the concept of fatphobia, associating the term with exclusion and prejudice based on weight. "Student A", for example, defines fatphobia as "prejudice and discrimination against fat people, a reality for many people". This view is also shared by "Student B", who describes fatphobia as "prejudice and discrimination against overweight people". The recognition of this prejudice is a constant in the answers, suggesting that the issue of fatphobia is already known and

experienced by many, even though coping with and overcoming this discrimination are continuous challenges.

The issue of fatphobia, or prejudice against overweight and obese people, is a widely present reality in today's societies. This stigma manifests itself in various contexts, such as health, education, and social interactions, generating harmful consequences for those who suffer from this prejudice. Research indicates that this discrimination not only marginalizes individuals with obesity, but also negatively affects their mental, physical, and social health (Westbury *et al.*, 2023).

The research by Świder (2023) highlights that the lack of understanding about obesity and the prejudices that accompany it contribute to inertia in social and health policies. It reinforces the stigmatization of obesity as a matter of social justice and points out the need to prioritize the issue in public health. The internalization of this stigma leads to complex biopsychosocial consequences, such as depression and anxiety, often intensified by discrimination experienced in social and work contexts (Świder *et al.*, 2023).

The analysis of the answers reveals that Physical Education classes are a space in which the students' bodies are constantly judged, especially for those who are overweight. This judgment has a significant emotional impact, causing many students to feel excluded and ashamed. "Student A" revealed: "I don't really like to participate in classes because I feel that the other students are prejudiced against me". This perception of exclusion was also mentioned by "Student C", who reported: "I was always excluded from the games because no one put me in the teams because I was fat and couldn't run properly".

A study by Campana (2014) points out that the physical shape of the Physical Education teacher significantly influences the willingness of students to participate in classes. Physical Education students, who should act as agents of transformation, also end up reinforcing the pressure for an 'ideal' body. This indicates that the culture of body assessment encompasses all those involved in the school environment, not restricted to students.

Silva et al. (2020) reinforce this observation, highlighting that Physical Education students, especially men, demonstrate an intense concern with physical appearance, associating it with their professional competence. This search for a standardized and muscular body is a clear expression of the social pressure that surrounds Physical Education classes.

In addition to physical development, Physical Education involves social and cultural aspects that shape the perception and evaluation of bodies. Physical Education, according to Bargas *et al.* (2020), by adopting medical and hygienist discourses, contributes to the

normalization of certain behaviors and body standards, reinforcing the idea that some bodies have more value than others. This process of normalization transcends Physical Education classes, impacting the school culture as a whole, where control over the body and behavior is common practice.

It was evident during the interviews at the Rui Barbosa School that shame and public exposure are recurring themes among the students who were interviewed, "Student D" for example, described a situation in which his Physical Education teacher took a scale to the classroom and checked his weight in front of all the students in the class, stating that he was "a chubby child". This type of experience creates emotional barriers and ends up keeping these students away from physical activities, generating feelings of embarrassment and devaluation.

CONCLUSION

In view of the evidence found in the theoretical frameworks used in this research, we can note the importance of School Physical Education focusing not only on physical aspects, but also on respect for body diversity, so that fatphobic behaviors are minimized in practical classes, as it is noticeable that these attitudes can negatively influence the learning and development of students who consider themselves victims.

It is important that preventive programs and actions that can combat existing cases of fatphobic bullying and other forms of violence and discrimination that occur in the school environment are disseminated within schools. Finally, it is essential that the entire school community is aware of the need to respect body types and diversity and not to foster prejudice and discrimination in all school spheres, including in practical classes of Physical Education.

The role of teachers in this context is crucial because, as authority and reference figures, they have a responsibility to create an inclusive and safe environment for all students, regardless of physical type. When teachers assume a posture of neutrality or acceptance of these prejudiced behaviors, they can end up reinforcing the normalization of fatphobic bullying. On the other hand, when they adopt active stances against discrimination and promote the appreciation of body diversity, they contribute to developing empathy and respect among students, promoting an inclusive school culture.

In this sense, the training of teachers deserves special attention, in order to enable them to deal with issues of prejudice and diversity, with the inclusion of topics such as fatphobia and body acceptance in continuing education curricula. There is also the challenge of preparing them to recognize and intervene in situations of discrimination in an

assertive and informed way. In addition, the implementation of pedagogical practices that consider the individuality of students, such as the adaptation of physical activities to promote full participation, can minimize the effects of fatphobia and encourage an environment of welcome and respect.

The creation of school policies to combat fatphobia is also necessary, including awareness campaigns that involve the entire school community. Through actions such as conversation circles and lectures on body acceptance, it is possible to sensitize students to the negative impacts of prejudice and promote the appreciation of diversity. These efforts contribute to the development of a school environment where everyone, regardless of their appearance, feels safe and valued.

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