

# **BODY IMAGE: THE VIEW OF DISABLED PEOPLE OF THEIR BODY SATISFACTION THROUGH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

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## **Introduction**

Most of the time, people with physical disabilities are seen as far from the ideal body model established by the standards of modern society, mostly due to the differences existing in their bodies, which are not normally considered ideal. We constantly notice that some physically disabled people are excluded from social life because they do not match the ideal body stereotype. This can cause changes in their body image, which is, as stated by Tavares (2003), the mental representation of body identity and is influenced by physiological, sociological and emotional aspects. According to Ferreira and Guimarães (2003), in our current society there is an overvaluation of what is considered beautiful, new, strong, useful and productive. Individuals with physical disabilities, different from the valued ones, have stigmas of being unproductive, imperfect and useless. Therefore, they can establish negative relationships with their bodies, given the influence people they are in contact with may have in the creation of their body image (Ferreira, 2005; Schilder, 1999).

In this way, it is known that movement offers a group of new sensations and perceptions to an individual, different from those experienced during a state of stillness, which will provide a more unified body identity (Schilder, 1999). Such a unified identity will be the precursor of a complete body image that will

bring healthy and positive relationships with their own bodies. However, is this premise also true among disabled individuals?

The aim of the present study was to check whether the practice of physical activities influences the level of satisfaction regarding the body image of physically disabled people. In this study the concept of dissatisfaction consists of the discrepancy between the body considered representative of the real one and the body considered representative of the ideal one (Furnham, Badmin & Sneade, 2002; Gardner, 2004).

## **Methodology**

This is an exploratory and quali-quantitative study.

### *Sample*

8 male individuals were evaluated, all with physical disabilities, living in the city of Juiz de Fora /MG, where 3 individuals had paraplegia, 2 disabled people due to a congenial cause, 2 handicapped due to amputation and 1 with hemiplegia. All of them declared themselves as practitioners of physical activity, at a weekly average of 2.63 ( $\pm$  1.598). The average age of the individuals is 30.63 ( $\pm$  9.303).

### *Tools*

Since no valid or accurate tools have been found to assess the body satisfaction of people with some kind of physical disability (Campana; Tavares, 2009), a semi-structured interview was created and adapted by the authors, based on the models of França and Azevedo (2003) and Cooper *et al*, (1987, as mentioned in Interdonado & Grecol, 2009, p. 4), where the questions were in relation to the level of satisfaction with body image: Are you happy with your body? Do you feel good with your body? Have you been worried about your physical shape? Would you like an appearance different than the one you have? Do you trust your body? Have you ever felt ashamed of your body? Do you avoid wearing certain types of clothing due to your physical disability? Do you think the practice of physical activities enhances your physical appearance?

The interview also included the type of physical disability, the age of the person being interviewed and the frequency of weekly physical activity, aiming at correlating the level of body image satisfaction with the practice of physical activities.

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee and the Federal University of Juiz de Fora, on May 20, 2010, according to the protocol number 2052.111.2010.

#### *Data analysis*

The data were analyzed descriptively and with statistical data treatment, using the SPSS v17.0 software for the descriptive and inferential analysis.

### **Results and Discussion**

In the analysis of the results, it is possible to conclude that the majority of individuals with physical disabilities who took part in the present study have shown high concerns towards the body and body dissatisfaction. It was found that 62.5% of the interviewed men frequently think about their body and they are very concerned with their physical shape. Another finding is that all the participants replied affirmatively when asked whether they would like to have an appearance different than their real one. This data allows a consideration about the impact the desire to have an ideal body, different than the one with the disability, may have on the body image of that individual. The desire for an appearance different than the actual state may reflect a condition of dissatisfaction with one's own dimensions and body shape, and with the appearance of oneself, which may suffocate the individual's subjectivity and lead him or her to psychic and eating disorders.

Other results show that 75% of the participants replied they do not trust their bodies, emphasizing the condition of dissatisfaction with their function. When it comes to the practice of physical activity, 75% of the participants said the practice enhances their appearance. This is relevant data within the study, and may promote among Physical Education professionals the belief that the practice of physical activity is a relevant facilitator of healthy relationships

between disabled people and their own bodies. Therefore, it would be possible for Physical Education teachers to take preventive and therapeutic actions when teaching physical activities to physically disabled students.

Finally, it is noticeable that although body dissatisfaction has been demonstrated in the present study, physical activity is pointed out by the majority of the participants as a major factor in the development of body image satisfaction. According to Tavares (2007), physical education can be one of the options for full development of body image. It can be emphasized through leisure, game, dance, recreation, body arts in general, as well as the exercise of discovery and search for acceptance, and the overcoming of limitations.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to assess whether the practice of physical activities influences the level of satisfaction with the body image of physically disabled people. According to the reports made by the individuals with physical disabilities who took part in this study, the practice of physical activities has a significant influence on the level of satisfaction with their bodies. The majority, represented by 75% of the participants, stated that the practice of physical activities enhances their appearance and makes them feel more pleased with their bodies.

However, the results of this study need more robust data in order to be confirmed, since a valid and accurate tool is needed for such purpose. According to Campana (2007), none of the tools that are available to the Brazilian researchers nowadays allow the assessment of the satisfaction with the Body Image of disabled people. This is corroborated by the need of the authors to adapt and create a questionnaire which reflected the obtained results.

Physical activity appears in this research as an important facilitator of healthy relationships between people with physical disabilities and their body. Relevant to highlight that it can increase the possibilities of body experiences, providing more quality of movement as a basic element of the integrated development of disabled people. We suggest, from this study, further and

greater discussions about the body image of physically disabled people, including a consideration of new evaluation methodologies.

**Key words: Body Image, Body Satisfaction, Body, Physical Disability.**

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