

Corporeality and Socialization, among Aerobics Practitioners at the ISSEP Gafsa

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Abstract

Our study uses a qualitative approach to collect relevant data. We have chosen to proceed by means of semi-structured interviews with students that practice aerobic. Based on a collection of interviews, we tried to highlight the socialization patterns influence on the construction of different relationships with the body. Our reflection focuses on the influence that a play structure can have on the communicative behaviors of players and seeks to learn about regular practice effects on the sporting games in terms of socialization. Body configuration undergoes changes related to the ways in which the body is used in practice. Each socio-motor activity clandestinely directs this socialization under the influence of what we would call its internal logic.

Keywords

Corporeality, Sociology of the Body, Socialization, Socialization of the Body, Aerobics, Gender

1. Introduction

The body sociology essentially focuses on the understanding of human corporeality (Le Breton, 2010: pp. 45-75). It should be known that the body “stems from this materiality dictated by the social, any practice involving both its use and productivity.” (Duret & Roussel, 2003: p. 128). Moreover, being the result of biological determinism, the body gives each individual access to a specific cultural sphere and then it erects itself as the main axis around which forces are animated to detach man from nature. In fact, the body appears as the point of intersection between what is collective and what is individual. It is the dialogue means between the apparent and the latent and confers on social and it gives the

capacity to designate and define. In fact, the individual “*is his own body, is as much as much as he possesses it*” (Warnier, 2004).

Embedded in daily activities, the body is defined as the axis around which the individual’s world revolves. Through the body, the individual materially creates a situation or a status. Thus, the body acts as an interface, not only because it exists in an environment that situates it, but also because it is the author of the concrete modification of this environment that modifies it in return. Thus, all the movements carried out and the body’s ways of existing in the world are manifestations of this Body-instrument without revealing the appearance of a dualist thought that would display a body nourished with consciousness or intentionality. On the contrary, it is a matter of restoring to corporeal existence of the cultural dimension of what seems the most natural. Thus, the body is the material condition for coming and for being into the world. The fact of being imposed by its existence in a given society through the repeated action of its work grants the body the status of a specific organism historically and geographically located.

It is undeniable that the body has an ability to meet the needs and to adapt to the constraints. The form changes according to the exercise while being put into play. This can be seen both in the body at work and in the body in sport training. In both situations, we exceed limits, and we achieved performance. Linhart underlines the similarity with sporting performance when he evokes the furious worker against the “woman-machine” who “*seems to be one with her easel, with the floor of the workshop*”: “*If the madwoman keeps going like that, they’ll raise the bonus payment again! (...) (There is always a ‘before’, and the same goes for sports records)*” (Linhart, 1978).

In this same perspective, the athlete’s body is his working instrument and his tool. Thus, sport is a theme closely linked to the study of the use of body techniques, which is in fact located between the sport sociology and the body sociology. It should be noted that several studies have focused on the evolution of the body’s sports techniques (Vigarello, 1988; Defrance, 2006) or have focused on a specific sport or art, such as rugby (Pociello, 1983), running (Bruant, 1992), boxing (Wacquant, 1989), football (Faure, 1989), classical and contemporary dance (Faure, 2000), aerobics (Travaillot, 1998) or even bodybuilding (Stutz, in Mechin, Bianquis Gasser, Le Breton, 2000).

Our research on corporeality and socialization in this socio-motor activity requires us to evoke the concept of socialization. Indeed, socialization also involves a relationship with the specific body of each individual who wishes to put it in “*social conformity*”. Thus, the body socialization is defined in relation to the activity requirements in which it is involved. Indeed, Berger, P.; Luckmann, T. (1986) and Elias, N. (1987) explain the primary socialization transmitted by parental education. Moreover, Durkheim, E. (1922) confirms in his book “*Education and Sociology*” that the education of children is clearly the core of the family socialization process.

Added to the habitus, Bourdieu, P. (1993, pp. 32-36) provides a theory of the

non-conscious aspect of education in his analysis of the processes of socialization. In fact, [Mauss, M. \(1950\)](#) was the first in the field of the sociology of incorporation. Then, in 1977, [Bourdieu, P.](#) carried out an interesting work on socialization. It is an incorporation since it creates bodies and different bodies.

In the same vein, [Durkheim, E. \(1995\)](#) points out that the transferability of the products of socialization pushes us to focus our attention on a second non-conscious aspect of incorporation and socialization. This includes the effects of its “*activation*” in situations that may be very different from those in which the provisions have been transmitted. Then, in (1993), he had already mentioned the social variability of education according to historical period, social class and even gender. For his part, [Bourdieu, P. \(2003\)](#) speaks of a “*hysteresis*” of the habitus formed during socialization in the family. Recently, [Cromer, S. \(2014: pp. 67-81\)](#) conducted a sociological study of gender socialization in the family. In this same context, it is important to mention the work of [Menesson, C. \(2004: pp. 69-90\)](#) on socialization modalities that explain “*reverse*” tastes and sports practices.

It goes without saying that socialization occupies a prominent place in sociology. Thus, it contributes to the understanding and explanation of many social phenomena. Nevertheless, this key concept is rarely highlighted in its relationship to the problem of the body. It is a decisive support for Socialization. Then, it would be appropriate to define it from a sociological perspective. As a result, socialization by the body is rather differential and it depends on gender in the practice of aerobics. It should be noted that the relationships between socialization and corporeality observed in this activity are influenced by internal and external factors.

It is known that not all individuals are subject to the same mode of socialization given the specific personal characteristics of each individual. In other words, they do not receive the same standards and values. That’s why we are talking about gender socialization within sports activities.

Our aim is check the applicability of theoretical model of the relationship between socialization and corporeality on this activity (aerobics).

2. Theoretical Model

The body connects an individual to his social environment and to others. This means that an individual seeks to construct and adapt certain bodily characteristics and behaviors and match them to include social characteristics and behaviors related to the biological sex. In this context, it is necessary to refer more comprehensively to the body phenomenological meaning through [Merleau-Ponty \(1996: p. 106\)](#).

He highlights three existential modalities of the body according to [Henry \(2001: pp. 200-207\)](#). In addition, [Christine Detrez \(2002: pp. 220-236\)](#) addresses the body social construction since the individual develops in all stages of life. In the same vein, [Le Breton \(1993: p. 16\)](#) states that social condition is the direct

product of one's body through the mechanisms of incorporation and naturalization (Bourdieu, 1979: pp. 85-94) but also of incarnation and title (Certeau, 1980: pp. 206-222).

Thus, the natural norms that make the body are confused about it. Dubois and Winkin (1998: pp. 11-12) present the body which intervenes fully in interactions. The body, in its own way, speaks as or against words. It becomes a semi-otic system on which rhetoric is based. On the other hand, Berthelot (1983: p. 125) attempts to situate the body sociology in relation to sociology.

Indeed, he explains that instead of talking about the sociology of the body, it is relevant to address the social uses of the body. Le Breton (1992: pp. 225-243) supports the idea that the body can only come from biology and anatomy.

In addition, Marcel Mauss (1999) thinks the body functions as an instrument. For him, every movement and every gesture that take the biological configuration of man respond to a mediation, a reflection, and a social model to which the individual belongs.

In another perspective, Linhart (1978: p. 41) argues that the athlete's body is his working instrument. Thus, sport is a theme closely related to the study of the use of body techniques.

In fact, this theme is situated between the sociology of sport and the sociology of the body. In the same vein, some researchers focus on sports body and gender. Indeed, Devereux (1998: pp. 335-367) considers that "the categories" men "and" women "represent two singularities specified by their sex of belonging conjugated in the movement of the existence by being similar, opposite and complementary".

Also, Butler (2006: p. 257) explains that corporeality is surrounded by a male subjectivity or a feminine subjectivity identified with a cultural belonging and social meanings in force. Lachheb (2008: pp. 57-74) emphasizes that "the uses of the body for the one and the other sex are codified and legitimized by reference to a model of the body ...". In this respect, the study of the body is very interesting since it consists of questioning the innate and acquired dimensions of masculine and feminine bodily characteristics.

Denise Jodelet (2003: p. 365) and Abric, J.C. (1994: p. 18) explain the concept of social representations of the body. Indeed, Abric distinguishes three main factors in relation to the practices of representations: cultural factors, factors related to the system of norms and values and factors related to the activity of the subject. For Denise Jodelet, the social representation of the body is built from four complementary approaches: the physical experience, the relationship of the body to the environment, social interactions and the notional and normative acquisitions.

Le Breton, D. (1992: pp. 130-158) presents the various facets of the first approach "bodily lived and body image" and the second approach "body and social environment" (Le Breton, 1985: pp. 125-137). Concerning the third approach, "body and social interactions", we find Goffman, E., (1973: pp. 138-139). Finally,

Lipovetsky (1997: pp. 135-143) explained the fourth approach “notional and normative body acquisitions”.

Our research on corporeality and socialization in physical activities needs to evoke the concept of socialization. Indeed, socialization involves a relationship to the specific body of each individual who wishes to put it in “social conformity”. In their book “The Social Construction of Reality”, considered a classic of the theories of socialization, Berger, P.; Luckmann, T. (1986, pp. 147-201) make a clear distinction between primary socialization and secondary socialization. Berger and Luckmann (1986) also try to establish a form of equivalence between the notions of secondary socialization and professional socialization, or more precisely to make professional socialization an integral part of secondary socialization.

3. Materials and Methods

Since existence essentially involves physical presence, the body is the link between the individual and his social environment. In other words, the individual’s main concern is to construct and adapt certain physical characteristics and behaviors in accordance with the expected social characteristics and behaviors related to his or her biological sex. Socialization also implies a relationship with the body specific to each individual seeking to put it in “*social conformity*”. In this perspective, the study of the body arouses undeniable interest because it relates to the innate and the acquired dimensions of male and female body characteristics.

Therefore, the body experience is apprehended according to the requirements of the activity in which it is invested (aerobics in this case). In this sense, “*corporeality is considered as a discursive operator*” (Berthelot, 1992, p. 11). Thus, it represents a solution for understanding the functioning of social systems, mainly the sports system and its relationship to the gender issue.

The practice of sport remains a proven factor in socialization and each sporting activity indirectly influences this socialization through its internal logic. Manifesting itself in communication, interaction allows this socialization to take place.

Socialization contributes to understanding and explaining many social phenomena. Nevertheless, this key concept seems in some cases neglected in its relation to the problematic of the body, which is nevertheless a decisive support for socialization, requiring to be understood from a sociological angle. That said, socialization by the body is rather differential, depending on gender, in the context of physical activities.

In order to highlight the relationship between socialization and corporeality in our research, we have chosen to make the following hypotheses:

- 1) *The processes of the socialization of sports throughout the body differ according to gender within the same discipline.*
- 2) *The involvement of the male body in a “female” sport suggests the exis-*

tence of specific gendered socialization patterns.

3) *Aerobics practitioners are confronted with a “double constrain”: mastering a “female” sporting gesture, while demonstrating their membership in the “male” category.*

3.1. Study Population

The approach adopted is of the qualitative type to access relevant data. We chose to use the semi-directive interview tool to collect information that could focus the interviewees' discourse on themes previously defined and listed in an interview guide.

3.2. Investigative Tool

The semi-structured interview is a qualitative information-gathering technique that focuses the respondents' speeches on previously defined themes recorded in an interview guide. We have put in place a semi-structured interview guide based on questions and on the understanding of the body and socialization of athletes. The particularity of the semi-structured interview is to give more importance to the subjects' words. The subjects studied are twenty students, male and female aerobics specialists from the Gafsa Higher Institute of Sport and Physical Education (in the Gafsa region, southern Tunisia). The age of these aerobics practitioners ranges from 21 to 24 years old. We have chosen a familiar space for the students to ensure that the interview runs smoothly. Each interview lasts about an hour.

The interview includes a guide organized around the following items:

- 1) *The general characteristics;*
- 2) *The sociology of the body;*
 - a) *Body experience;*
 - b) *Relationship of the body to the environment;*
 - c) *Social interactions;*
 - d) *Notional and normative acquisitions;*
- 2) *Socialization;*
 - a) *Sports socialization;*
 - b) *Participation in peer groups;*
 - c) *Family configurations.*

4. Discussion of the Results

4.1. From the Perception of the Body to Social Representations

In this specific context, aerobics provides its practitioners with the advantages of sport practice and body reconsideration.

Ines explains that aerobics has allowed her to have a good relationship with her body. As a little girl, she didn't trust herself and didn't think she was particularly beautiful. However, in aerobics one must be self-confident. Women must feel beautiful to feel good in their bodies. By setting her body in motion, she has

had gained self-confidence, acceptance of the body and self-esteem.

Meriem explains that she does abs training for her own self and to change the way others see her. Therefore, it is clear that building your muscles and improving your body has an influence on your social life.

For Ahmed, aerobics also allowed him to discover his body, to have more self-confidence, to have a good musculature, to feel comfortable in his skin and to acquire a good lifestyle through achieving a certain balance between the body and the mind.

Manel has found in aerobics a way to let go. She says: *“I was too shy and physically rigid. By practicing aerobics, I was able to free myself at the level of my body”*.

50% of the entire women sample indicated that playing sports was beneficial but created some complexities. Samira and Karima talk about the influence of aerobics on the acceptance of their bodies:

“(...) So sometimes it makes you uncomfortable, if you see others thinner, more beautiful when you see beautiful girls like that, then you are more uncomfortable”.

(Samira)

“(...) me, I was complexed by my buttocks, my big hips, I wore glasses ... We see our body all the time, we have to accept it”.

(Karima)

“In high school, I was overweight, uncomfortable, they laughed at all the time. While practicing aerobics, I started to lose weight, to have a muscular body (...)”.

(Youssef)

For several decades, the body has been idealized to the point of being the object of all attention without exception: dietetics, maintenance, surgery, medicalization, outdoor recreation, etc. The ultimate purpose is to control and to perfect the body to achieve an *“absolute”* state of well-being, fullness.

Through the interaction it brings about, aerobics allows the practitioner to reconcile himself with his self-image and to take care of his body, to embellish it in order to love it better, and finally to improve his relationships with others. It seems that becoming self-aware of one's body helps him to accept it.

Jodelet (2003) strongly emphasizes body's different representations that have to do with lifestyle, and body thinking, and cultural change. These anthropologists have been able to prove that the body and its expressions meet social norms and that self-judgment through appearance is clearly valued in our society. Appearance is an indicator of social interaction. Therefore, the body has a social function and it can be considered as an object of social representation. Then, It is clear that man exists only through his body which is a material evidence. However and beyond physiology and biology, the body is the product of a whole social and cultural context. In all its aspects, the body is part of society. For David Le Breton, *“the process of socializing bodily experience is a constant in human social condition”*.

4.2. Social Representations of Aerobics

4.2.1. The Notion of “Gender Provisions”

In the Gafsa region, the majority of aerobics practitioners opt for a well-defined aerobic style where virility, strength, surpassing, heterosexuality and domination are the norms.

“I opt for a strict style in my gestures to prove that aerobics is not a female practice. It is made for both men and women (...).”

(Youssef)

The various meanings of the notion of aerobics converge towards the opposition between the institutionalized, normalized or repressed by socio-cultural norms, and an expressive, spontaneous and original body. Femininity and masculinity are highlighted through body and crystallize through specific body forms, postures and differentiated body gestures. By merging into the body self, these gender properties impose stereotypical behavioral patterns and self-presentation prototypes on the individual according to the sex group to which they belong. Consequently, femininity and masculinity are highlighted by criteria that determine them and that effectively draw the lines of the female and male bodies. They are socially implemented, which “*forces us to believe in its necessity and naturalness*” (Butler, 2006: p. 264), but also in its invariable appearance.

4.2.2. Men in a “Female” Practice

Basically, aerobics is socially understood as a female practice. Throughout history, it has gradually diversified by feminizing itself, and today, like other disciplines, is similar to a place of contemporary practices and styles that are more or less “naturalized”, or at least more or less differentiated.

“I don’t dare tell my friends in the neighbourhood and my parents that I practice aerobics since they consider it a female practice (...).”

(Karim)

Guillaumain’s (1992) work sheds light on the importance of the body and the processes of incorporation in the production and reproduction of gender differences. The decisive role of “*body learning*” (Faure, 2000: p. 81) in the implementation of gender criteria institutes bodily practices (sports or artistic) as a privileged analyzer of this process. To this extent, sports practices which are the very expression of the naturalization of gender differences and the reproduction of male domination (Bourdieu, 1999: p. 116) are the focus of particularly interesting investigations that allow us to understand the modalities of constitution (and modification) of the actors’ gendered provisions.

4.3. Socialization Process

4.3.1. Sports Socialization

For a significant portion of the study population (4 students), we found that they had initially opted for another sport. This is due to the choices required of parents. Some fathers transmit their sporting practice by instilling or by bringing their daughters or sons to the sports field at an early age to learn the technical

characteristics of the activity.

It is in this sense that Karim says: *“My father brings me every day from the age of four to practice karate, even though I hate the sport. At the age of 15, I ran away from karate class to watch aerobics (...)”*.

For Mohamed, it is thanks to his brother that he practiced aerobics from an early age. For the majority of aerobics practitioners, it is thanks to the media and the Internet that they have turned to aerobics. A minority is influenced by peer groups.

“I’m a middle-distance runner. At ISSEP, I started playing tennis, but I really enjoyed aerobics as a fun activity. I spend hours and even a whole evening watching aerobics videos carefully (...)”.

(Majdi)

For three aerobics practitioners, the constraint of making a choice of specialty in the second year led them to this sport. For them, this practice was within reach and does not require perfect physical fitness.

“Before I joined ISSEP, I didn’t play sports. In the second year, I had to choose a sports specialty. I had no choice, I turned to aerobics (...)”.

(Rihab)

It is important to note that the process of the individual’s socialization extends throughout one’s life. It is anchored in a privileged way during childhood. It is during this period that personality is formed through the acquired essential roles that will be assumed later and through the understanding of collective rules and the construction of one’s identity (Mead, 1963: pp. 207-217). Several institutions, including family, school, media, peer groups ... fulfill the function of socialization. Individuals internalize values and assimilate norms that P. Bourdieu refers to as *“habitus”*.

4.3.2. Participation in Peer Group

Aerobics has allowed six out of ten people to be less shy and more open to others. In addition, many people felt that their integration into the group was easier.

Meriem thinks that because she has been attending various courses since she was a child, she has dared to get to know strangers more and has learned to talk to people better, without being too shy.

The same thing goes with Karima who was able to integrate into a group and meet new people through aerobics because she was very shy.

In addition, her relationship with her aerobics friends was different from that of others. Together, they had a common goal, they made efforts.

For Manel, the shows also played a role in his extroversion. The fears of the unknown, of the beginning, have been transformed into social openness. She adds that she appreciates practicing aerobics with other students when there is a group spirit.

Many subjects explained the way aerobics classes reduced their shyness. When they have acquired a certain maturity that allows them to go to a new city for an internship or course, it no longer frightens them. They admit to integrate quick-

ly and even more quickly if they are gifted. The ability to perform the steps in a good way is a factor in integrating a new young person into an aerobic group.

“I was a little scared of how I was going to fit in, and it went very well because I’m not too bad either. I was able to integrate into aerobics, so I made a lot of friends”.

(Majdi)

4.3.3. Special Family Configurations

Parents (of one in ten female students) refuse to let their daughter practice aerobics. For them, aerobics is a practice that contrasts with the Islamic religion. Ahmed says:

“My parents are opposed to aerobics. My father considers aerobics to be a purely female practice and is opposed to religion (...)”.

4.4. The Acculturation Processes of the Practitioners

Most students (eight out of ten) who practice aerobics are influenced by Western music, and this can be seen in the way they move, dress and comb their hair. This attitude is explained by the global assimilation of the other’s values, the adoption of his norms and of foreign culture in general.

“(...) The music with a high (beats per minute) and the way I dress give me more confidence and energy to perform”.

(Ahmed)

For the students (two girls wearing the “hijab”), they are influenced by music and the way they move.

“Wearing a veil does not contradict music and sport. It is true that I am a practitioner, but it has never caused any problems (...)”.

5. Conclusion

The sports area offers people multiple frames of sexual socialization that contribute to the construction of gendered dispositions. Indeed, this is a “sexual inheritance” (Lahire, 2001: pp. 219-238) that fits imperceptibly to make sense of both femininity and masculinity by reference to the sociocultural norms. Starting from a body of interviews with aerobics practitioners, our goal was to highlight the characteristics of the body experience of these practitioners who have integrated a sport traditionally recognized as feminine.

Our study is placed in the perspective of the sociology of the body and it focuses on the management modes of corporeality by the sports institution around the expression modes of the social construction of the body, precisely those which relate to the sexual identity.

The first hypothesis states that the processes of sporting socialization across the body differ by sex within the same discipline. Results revealed that the socialization of women differs from that of men in the same discipline.

Aerobics is conceived as a fitness practice. Socialization of women differs from that of men since we have men in a sports activity often considered female.

In the Gafsa region, the majority of aerobics practitioners are opting for an aerobic style where virility, strength, surpassing and domination are the order of the day. Thus, Femininity and masculinity are expressed by criteria of gender distinction between the modalities of the female body and those of the male body. The majority of aerobics practitioners initially practiced another sporting activity. This is due to the choices imposed by the parents. Moreover, for most practitioners of aerobics, it is thanks to the media and the internet that they have turned towards this specialty.

It must be emphasized that a minority is influenced by peer groups. Aerobics practitioners have a global assimilation and an adoption of the values and the culture of the other because the media is a factor of socialization for the aerobics practitioners. Three aerobics practitioners confessed that they were forced to choose a specialty in the second year and that they had turned to the sport. For them, this practice is within reach and does not necessarily require good physical condition.

For the second hypothesis: the commitment of the human body to a “feminine” sport suggests the existence of specific modes of gendered socialization. The semi-directive interviews analysis shows that this hypothesis is confirmed given the specificity of this sporting activity.

Regarding aerobics, a significant part of the population studied, shows that it was not for her an initial choice and that at the beginning he had integrated another sport practice. It was more of a choice imposed by the parents. Some fathers transmit their sport practice by impregnation by bringing their daughters or boys from a young age on the sports ground to learn the technical characteristics of the activity.

For the majority of aerobics practitioners, it is thanks to the media and the internet that they have turned to aerobics. A minority is influenced by peer groups or brothers.

For three practitioners of aerobics, the constraint of choosing a specialty in the second year has oriented them towards this sport. For them, this practice is within reach and does not require a good physical condition.

It is undeniable that the socialization of the individual continues throughout life, even if it is more anchored and privileged during childhood. It is during this period that one’s personality is formed through “the acquisition of essential roles, the understanding of collective rules and the construction of one’s own identity” (Mead, 1963: pp. 207-217). Several factors ensure this socialization: family, school, media, peer groups... Individuals adopt values and assimilate norms. Bourdieu, P., (1980, pp. 88-89) uses the term “habitus” to designate the way in which individuals internalize the given notions, conform them to their reality and constitute a guide to their rules, conduct, and judgment.

In order to complete our study, we have analyzed the third hypothesis: Aerobics practitioners are confronted with a “dual constraint”: mastering a “female” sporting gesture while demonstrating their belonging to the “man” category. It is through the analysis of student interviews that we were able to confirm this hy-

pothesis.

Moreover, this fitness activity that is aerobics is an indisputable factor of body wellness. It is part of a physical activity of muscle building and joint mobilization, general or localized with musical support. Anglicism "Fitness" meaning health, fitness, well-being, is often used in everyday language and refers to all practices and activities of fitness or maintenance.

Through a corpus of interviews with aerobics practitioners, which is a sport activity traditionally recognized as feminine, we have tried to highlight the modalities of the body experience. Aerobics allows its practitioners to play sports and thereby become aware of their body and accept it. Man exists only through his body, he is shaped by the social and cultural context that surrounds him.

This probably explains the reason the body has become a pole of interest and of various attentions: dietetics, maintenance, surgery, medicalization, outdoor recreation, etc. The goal is one: to master and perfect the body to reach a state of "absolute" well-being, a fullness.

Aerobics is a practice that combines both sport and awareness of one's body. Admittedly, man exists only through his body. He is the product of a whole social and cultural context that surrounds him and it is through social interactions that he frees himself from his conflict with his image. Aerobics allows you to take care of your body, to embellish it to accept it and to love it as it is, and finally to immerse yourself in your relationships with others.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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