

Sport activities and EDs

Isabella Corvino
Università degli Studi di Perugia
isabella.corvino@unipg.it

Abstract

The aim of these articles is to approach the theme of Eating Disorders (EDs) connected with sport activities. Sports activity remains an open field: it is not in itself didactic nor does it necessarily represent a positive experience. In sport, themes such as identity, relationships, health, are strictly bonded to self-realization, social pressure on performance and desirable beauty standards; this partially poisoned the sport environment.

The spectacularized and consumerist form of these activities - mostly linked to social distress and the communication world -, the way to perfection storytelling can sometimes bring out disorders or even there can be the case in which people use sport to hide the disorder behind strict health protocols. We need to focus a more cautious look on sport so that it can be filled with positive meanings linked to the emancipation of oneself, to a playful dimension as fun and pleasure, to educational paths, free expression and equality.

Keywords: sport activities; body; sociology; sport; eating disorders.

1. Introduction

Sociological interest in sport and corporeality has a long tradition. The critical gaze focused on those individual and collective activities that apparently involve a light time, can identify very important relational processes and self-construction dynamics. Interpretations given to the concept of the body from Cartesianism onwards have raised important questions that have implications in the way we consider sports activities as moments of learning useful for fostering the development of relational (Corvino, 2021), cognitive and emotional skills. A new education based on corporeality seems to have taken hold and the reflections on the connection between this and the possibility of creating an ethical and democratic space useful for reducing social and health problems, both physical and mental, are of great importance (sport for inclusion, Karberidou 2019; sport against deviance, Postnov and Kostyunina 2021; sport for rehabilitation, Landale and Roderik 2014; sport and health, Edwards and Casper, 2012; Schulenkorf, Siefken, 2019). Undoubtedly sporting activity with its re-joining to the bodily dimension, connecting it to the sphere of rules and at the same time to the imaginary, can create a very interesting social environment. On the other hand, sport, despite the narrative of recent years, is not in itself didactic nor does it necessarily represent a positive experience. In sport, themes such as identity, relationships, health, performance, collaboration and trust (as well as their opposite) are closely intertwined. The spectacularized and consumerist form of these activities, mostly linked to communication via social media, the continuous challenge to

the limit and the search for perfection can sometimes be themes that bring out disorders (Grilo et al., 2009, El Ghoch et al., 2013). There can even be the case in which people use sport to hide disorders behind strict health protocols. Data drawn from 120 different journals, from 1979 to 2017, classified according to their primary subject area, produced a large number of articles on the topic of sport addiction and eating disorders/body image (Larocque and Moreau, 2022). Sports activity remains an open field; we need a more attentive look on it so that it can be populated again with more positive meanings linked to the emancipation of oneself, to playful dimensions as fun and pleasure, to educational paths, to free expression and equality.

In this contribution, the main research questions are about: the relationship between corporeality and mind; corporeality and social models; corporeality and performance; EDs as a result of a misrecognized relation between the two terms of the previously mentioned questions. For this particular contribute, the concept of “sport activity” will be used as that subset of physical activity¹ made up of exercises planned and structured to improve one’s physical condition to enlarge the field of research comprehending the professional sport and the non-agonistic sport dimension. The author does not want to restrict the field of study to the “physicality” of the activity alone, the links that also affect the personal sphere will be investigated indeed. In the mind of the author physical activity can support individual pathways relating to the self or self in relation to others, improving awareness of one’s body as already recognized in literature (Ströhle, 2009; White et al., 2009). Reducing EDs to an alleged obsession with thinness could sound quite limiting but in the next paragraph the contribute will try to underline the nexus between thinness, performance, social models, social malaise that could spring in a “healthy and safe” environment as the sport world. Under which circumstances these connections come into play cannot be better specified as the phenomenon seems to emerge as a social problem involving all the investigated target with no exclusions. For the magnitude of the topic, in the mind of the author there would need more studies to better investigate the topic especially to highlight good practices and the commitment of sports associations that are fighting EDs. This future work could finally lead to hypothesize research paths of great importance and interest for the social sciences.

The role of sport activities in developing a positive body image perception has been widely investigated, but not in the case of negative body image or the nexus with mental illness. People choose sport and use their body to better express needs, ideas, identities, limits and illness. Body image has been studied as the expression of social fact, so it should be done with the sport activity. Sport activity does not just change the body but allows it to match with beauty models, to express individual or social desires, to compensate for social stress or to hide disorders, change perception, and control our physical selves. The aim of these articles is to approach the theme of Eating Disorders (EDs) connected with sport activities. The issue of self-realization, the constant social pressure on performance and desirable beauty standards partially poisoned the sport environment. The body as a sociological object has become a battlefield in which the positive impact of the physical activity can be definitively wrecked. The

¹ According to Caspersen et al. (1985) physical activity includes any movement, produced by muscles, that results in energy expenditure.

issue of excellence is particularly thorny. In following a path of great rigor, athletes, as well as non-professional sportsmen, are continually exposed to confrontation with very specific standards. Moreover, “traditionally, sports have been grouped based upon whether or not the sport emphasizes leanness as a competing factor. Due to sociocultural factors, risk for ED may also be associated with the sport type” (Mancine et al., 2020, p. 8). Sportsmen, along their path undermine not only their careers but also their physical and mental health. As affirmed by Tortsveit and Sundgot-Borgen (2005) there is a distinction between “leanness” and “non-leanness” sports. In some sports specialties, the requirement related to thinness is quite essential to reach success. On the other hand, for the “non-leanness” sports, the question connected to scores and positions has to be underlined: “Perfectionism plays a role in the psychological impact of DE (disordered eating) in an athlete, acting both as a symptom and a risk factor for DE. Perfectionism often influences an athlete to have unrealistic expectations, which can result in dissatisfaction with body image and sport performance. Research has found a correlation between DE and perfectionism, with an emphasis on precision and personal expectation for an athlete to achieve a sport-specific body to improve performance (Mancine et al., 2020, p. 9).

Leanness sports can therefore be divided, in Mancine et al. work, as in the following figure:

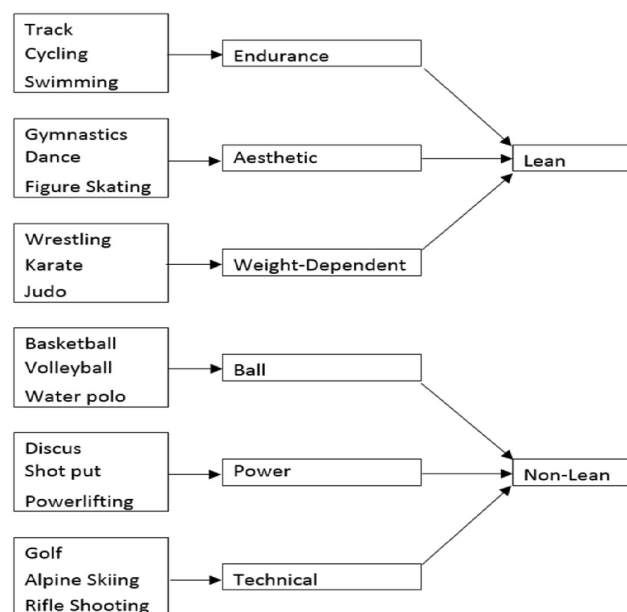


Fig. 1 Examples of various sports and the categories they fit in. The groupings of sports that define lean and non-lean sports are also provided (Mancine et al., 2020)

Achieving and maintaining a lower body weight is very important in lean sports as there is the belief this can improve performance (Martinsen et al., 2010). In aesthetic sports, appearance is a major factor, the desire to lose weight becomes part of a particular sport storytelling built on the achievement of a sport-specific body ideal, in this case the shape of the body itself is a goal as well as working on the grace of movement or body resistance. The issue is nowadays well known, judges receive adequate training on the evaluation criteria but Boen et al. (2008) could

identify some judgment biases affecting the preferences on athletes' performances: nationality (patriotism); the tendency to be influenced by the carrier and past performances; the order of appearance on the platform; notoriety effect (for media popularity) or an aesthetic conformity to sporting and socially approved standards.

Some of the risks related to EDs are calculated (or expected) and managed, but they are not cancelled out. In Wilmore (1991) the study underlined a very interesting insight: those who develop EDs may become sportsmen. Chiara Francesconi in her studies could even individuate the nexus between actors such as "athletic" personality characteristics (goal orientation, perfectionism, compulsiveness and ability to block distractions), and EDs together with performance anxiety, inappropriate weight loss in favour of performance. Moreover, starting sport-specific training at an early age can open to a particular vulnerability, as intensive training can represent an additional risk factor for the development of a negative self-vision (Malina et al., 2004). All these factors will be investigated in the next paragraphs.

2. Limit vs identity

Cavazza and Guidetti (2020) identified three nutritional approaches: emotional, restrictive and external. They are linked to specific environments and conditionalities: the emotional state can call for comfort food to recall happy moments or give that satisfaction that cannot be found elsewhere; the restrictive way can show a need for control; the external one is based on visual, olfactory or sound stimuli and is not really linked to hunger. Controlling hunger, having self-control or adapting one's own diet to external relations or stimuli can be very puzzling. The ideal body is more and more related to personal identity storytelling: the body shows a self-evident reality and identity. The body is never naked, as sociological object it always shows the signs of a personal and collective identity; let us just think about the difference and the meaning of a fashion-model body or a sport-model body: they do not only show a personal choice but the social imaginary too. The skin, tattoos, scars, calluses, a certain posture are very significant factors.

Iacolino et al. (2017) show how often in subjects focusing on achieving the ideal image through the assiduous and controlled practice of sporting activity the presence of an altered perception of the body can be identified. Sometimes this bodily misperception is associated with the inability to recognize and express one's emotions, resulting in an exaggerated practice that can lead to addiction. Researchers already stated that a substantial portion of EDs and body image issues are imputable to sporting and competitive contexts (Iacolino et al., 2017). Sometimes, the sporting environment would dictate body and weight standards, or an ideal of perfection ever closer to extreme and unnatural models. The problematic relationship with one's body would lead to the dissociation of oneself, from one's own body, which comes to represent the real limit to the expression of the "best part of oneself". The body represents one of the possibilities of expressing one's self, but failing to achieve the ideal physical shape could lead to a distortion of the body image, or "Body Dysmorphism". According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder V, this disorder is linked to the concern for physical defects or imperfections together with the implementation of compulsive "care" behaviours.

This concern compromises the healthy relationality of the subject who would tend not to recognize himself in his own body. The ways of camouflaging this disorder are often found in apparently very healthy behaviours: precisely as a great sporting commitment and orthorexia. The prefix *ortho* in ancient Greek means “correct”, while *orexis* indicates appetite. The term describes the obsession with healthy eating, that is not the search for a diet program to improve one’s health, but a pathological obsession with the consumption of biologically pure and healthy foods. Maintaining this diet requires strict self-discipline, the rigor increases self-esteem and promotes a sense of distance and superiority (Atzeni et al., 2020). Food restrictions increase over time and can lead to the elimination of entire food groups and/or to more frequent and/or severe practices of purification or detoxifying fasting. The excessive role given to physical fitness and nutrition in such cases is the exemplification of a search for recognition and a process of processing a self that fails to coincide with positive models and feel part of an ideal group.

In fact, Nicolosi defines late modern society as an “orthorexic society”. According to this perspective, orthorexia nervosa represents a subjective and social response within a food framework characterized by uncertainty: food fears are the expression of the social affirmation of an anxious syndrome that expresses the symbolic relationship with food and the body. It is not only a question of fear of physical contamination, but also of the loss of a symbolic-identity or ethical-ideological purity (for example, the vegetarian style): food becomes a symbolic object that marks the belonging of individuals, belonging that give substance to specific lifestyles or consumption practices (Atzeni et al., 2020, p. 208).

Sports and food are expressions of the same social anxieties: the body remains a battlefield between right and wrong (a feeling of distress caused by a misrecognized identity) and the outside and the inside (a feeling of distress caused by the relation between the self and society). The dialectical and conflictual relationship between ideal and reality in today’s society is increased by the pervasiveness of the media: the rational condemnation of unhealthy behaviours is becoming increasingly ordinary. The analysis and study of policies that associate mental health, sport and physical activity are becoming more and more frequent. From 2002, WHO published studies for the prevention and promotion of mental health. Physical activity is perceived as a useful tool for the treatment of anxiety (Carter et al., 2021). Depression seems to be related to the perception that the individual has of his own body, which physical activity can positively influence (White et al., 2009). Excessive concern for one’s physical shape can be a symptom of distress, or as already stated, physical activity can be a screen behind which to mask such a thing in a socially acceptable way. In this contribution the author wants to keep a neutral position with respect to the policies that identify sport and sporting activities as an easy solution to such numerous personal and social problems as more studies should be conducted to be able to affirm this. The split between mind and body appears to the authors’ minds as the result of an unhealthy relationship with oneself and others that arises from not knowing how to identify and understand one’s own and others’ emotions or social changes, an alexithymic²

² “The concept of alexithymia is very complex and in order to fully understand its meaning it is necessary to differentiate emotions from feelings. The emotions, in particular, constitute the biological component of the affects, genetically programmed and mediated by the subcortical and limbic systems, functional to the survival of the species; feelings, on the

behaviour. The resulting confusion and anxiety would lead to a rigid approach to regulating the body to maintain control over other areas as well. These alexithymic subjects have difficulty in describing and identifying their own and others' emotions, their imaginative abilities are lacking, the cognitive style is practical and operative because it is not very reflective (Iacolino et al., 2018). Competition and sport activities are easily used by these subjects to hide unhealthy behaviours.

Limit and identity are part of the same game: the expression of the Self. The continuous confrontation with the limit has shaped human history, but for this specific contribution it is important to underline how Modernity and its storytelling about the *homo faber* who can incessantly push the horizon further while building himself as a machine, had a social impact on the relevance of the endurance issue. Endurance and motivation cross-fertilized the field of sport and sport activities, being the visible sign of a culture and of a particular lifestyle claiming for success and a feeling of self-improvement: "Dark personality traits (not because they are negative but because they are more hidden), understood as a personal and adaptive response to the psychosocial relationships that athletes establish while practicing these sports [...] trying to give the best of one-self combined with high intensity and the achievement of new challenges in the search for unlimited improvement" (Nogueira et al., 2019, p. 26). Exercise addiction and narcissism and psychopathy could constitute a risk factor for some sport activities. The never-ending battle against the limit in sport and sport activities may hide a dark side: it may translate the super positive narration in a self-injurious conduct. The body is the expression of the limit and for this reason it is taken beyond its possibilities in the search for a state that brings the powerful mind and the invincible body into balance.

3. Models and performance

Very low body weight is a key clinical feature of anorexia nervosa, but can also be present in a subgroup of patients with eating disorder NOS (not-otherwise-specified). Subgroups of not-underweight eating disorder patients with bulimia nervosa or eating disorder NOS may also present severe weight loss. Many athletes and coaches believe that weight loss and thinness can have a significant effect on sport performance, which may in part explain the higher prevalence of eating disorders in athletes. However, evidence to supporting this assumption is scarce. [...] However, one study did report that medal-winning gymnasts tended to have lower body fat than the non-medal-winning gymnasts. [...] Wilmore, commenting on this finding, suggested that although weight loss and low weight may

other hand, are much more complex individual psychological phenomena, since they involve cognitive processing and subjective experience mediated by neocortical functions. This psychological component of affect makes it possible to evaluate the emotional response to external and interpersonal stimuli, and to intentionally communicate emotions through the verbal and extraverbal linguistic functions. Therefore, feelings depend on the culture they belong to, on the experiences and representations of oneself and others (Caretta, La Barbera, 2005). [...] In alexithymic subjects, emotions are weakly connected to symbolic images and words and, on the other hand, are experienced as physical sensations and tendencies to action. Therefore, alexithymia can be defined as a deficit related to feelings (Kauhanen, 1993). The individual will be characterized by an identity crisis as a consequence of uncertainty in decisions and barrenness of feelings. There is a lack of protagonism and communication. What classifies a subject as alexithymic would therefore be the difficulty in identifying feelings and distinguishing between feelings and physical sensations; difficulty in describing one's feelings to others; reduced ability to imagine and an externally oriented cognitive style" (Iacolino et al., p. 18).

enhance athletic performance in certain sports, there is a point beyond which continued weight loss produces a negative effect on performance, presumably due to the excessive loss of lean body mass and fluids, as seen in patients with anorexia nervosa (El Ghoch et al., 2013, p. 51).

It is quite stunning to associate something like severe weight loss to sport body imaginary, EDs with the so-called “starvation symptoms”. As described in several studies the nexus between the sportive body, the ideal body and high performance is very clear; it is not clear if the rigorous sport environment and the performance stress can lead to such behaviours or a propension to such behaviours fit well with the sport environment. As body and self are strictly intertwined, these kinds of disorders are usually related to preoccupation about eating, irritability, mood changes, social isolation, apathy, that will inevitably compromise sport performance and social relations. Excessive and compulsive exercising (as high as 80% of cases) seems to play a significant role in the onset and maintenance of EDs. Unfortunately, especially in athletes, excessive compulsive exercise is difficult to detect and could be identified only when the case of “overtraining syndrome” is evident.

The risk produced by RWL depends on a combination of factors, such as the amount of reduced BM, time for this reduction, and the frequency of episodes and/or strategies used for RWL. To achieve RWL athletes use a combination of several potentially harmful methods, such as severe restriction of intake of food and liquids, exercising with plastic or heavy clothing, use of saunas, taking diet pills, or even vomiting. Although there are various strategies for RWL, dehydration and food restriction are the most common methods and, together, result in alterations in body fluid and the availability of glycogen (Castor-Praga et al., 2021, p. 6).

This syndrome is at the same time a physical, behavioural, and emotional condition: the point of this state reveals how the volume and intensity of an individual’s exercising could exceed the recovery capacity (El Ghoch et al., 2013, Torstveit, Sundgot, 2005). The fight against personal limit, body limit and social expectations is very clear when facing these kinds of phenomena. Mental health is a key resource for athletes in relation to their performance and even for sport activities it is a significant asset to develop one’s own strategy to take care of personal physical conditions. A substantial growth in athletes’ mental health-related problems, such as EDs, overtraining, and identity crisis has been revealed by the International Society of Sport Psychology (Schinke et al., 2018): is this the consequence of a betrayed sport imaginary? Was it a consequence of the continuous particularization of sport environment and body modelization? Body image distortion and refusal or inability to maintain normal body weight, although traditionally viewed as a “western” disease driven by socio-cultural pressures are multi-factorial and found across all societies and cultures. To approach such complex issues Wells et al. (2020) investigated family history of mental illness and body image disturbances. Assessment and engagement of networks, parental support in the process seem important to facilitate disorder emersion and implementation of interventions. Successful treatments are not just professional, but try to work on the limit between the professional line and the relational sphere. As the disturb is in part a consequence of a failed socialization process, therapists have to start from that point. Methodologies and tools commonly used are reshaped and enriched by

contributions deriving from different methodologies involving: body, imaginary, narration, and physical activity. Those methods aim to work on the embodied knowledge, figures, signs, symbols, or other non-material manifestations or aspects of reality. The false impression of a separation between sensory/affective experience and cognitive experience (Benvenuti L., 2001 and 2008) produced the crisis of the body/mind relation. “On the growing freedom of man, on the infinite possible that is just waiting to be explored. [...] (the body) has become weight, ballast, brute matter, while maintaining a disturbing resemblance to its previous face and to the one that continues to be its victim. Today the Other is the body” (D’Andrea, 2005, p. 22). Ignoring bodily manifestations by pretending that they are cartesianly disconnected from cognitive processes supports the idea that denying the body reality, as it is just the material support of the Great Mind, controlling the body to forge a perfect image of a social recognized model can lead to the deprivation of meaning of the corporeal reality, causing physical and/or psychic symptoms of malaise (Rossetti, Russo, 2022; Rossetti, 2022; De Yzaguirre and Castillo, 2022). In Wells (2020) a multidisciplinary team worked on the issue involving a huge number of specialists from different disciplines; in the mind of the author the sociology contribution could be valuable as it could work on a transversal line through all the mentioned disciplines reading the phenomenon from an individual, collective and imaginary point of view. Creating a healthy sport system would mean that sporting organisations should be aware of the increased incidence of EDs in high performance athletes and sport environment. This would require a serious understanding of the negative effect of an excessive economization and spectacularization of the sport world.

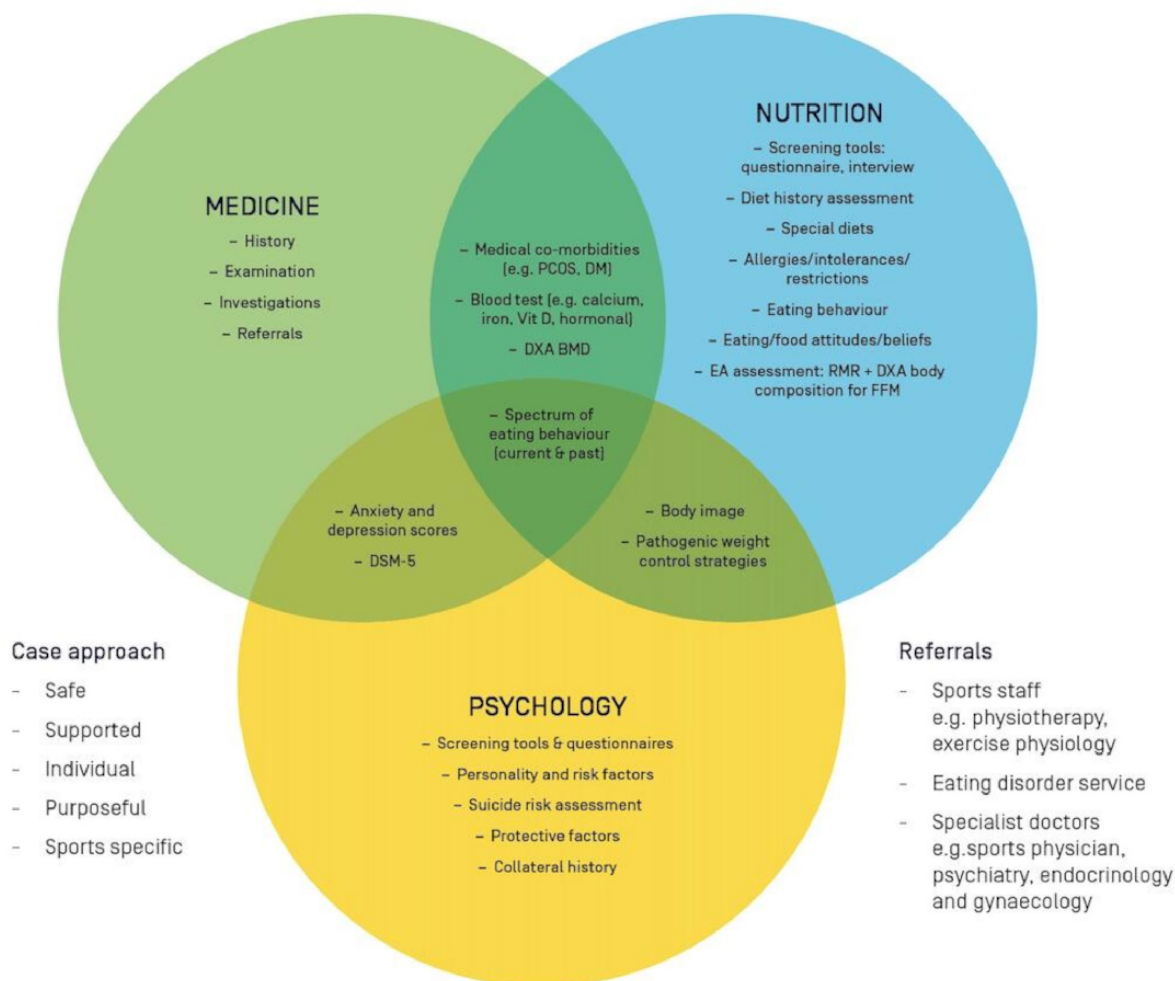


Figure 2. Core multidisciplinary team management by a doctor, sports dietitian and psychologist (Wells et al., 2020, p. 6)

The prevalence of eating disorders is higher among female athletes/non-athletes compared to male athletes/ non-athletes, and among athletes compared to non-athletes. It is especially athletes in sports that emphasize leanness who are at risk, but there might be gender differences as to which sports are most at risk. [...] There is still a need for increased openness and awareness related to eating disorders among both male and female athletes. Coaches and administrators have to accept the seriousness of this issue, and all personnel involved in athletes need to increase their competence on early identification, treatment and prevention of eating disorders in all athletes regardless of age and gender (Martinsen et al., 2012, p. 506).

Of course, it is quite simple to work with athletes and professional sportsmen, it is quite impossible to work with individuals who can prudently hide personal disorders behind sport. Guidelines for early identification and prevention of EDs should not be a taboo, as well as the promotion of healthy lifestyles on a human scale. Revising the socialized body image could be

the first step of a long path: a positive body image is one of the protective factors against EDs. It is significant to acknowledge that negative and positive body images are two different yet interconnecting social constructs and both need to be considered. Between the socially desirable body image and reality there would always be a difference; it is quite funny that in our Western culture the primacy of the mind over the body is a plain reality since 1700 and yet nowadays people easily entrust the body with the task of reporting on its own identity, a set of values and a regulatory framework. The body remains the first object to be looked at when it comes to the socialization process.

Fun and enjoyment should remain the main components why individuals engage in physical and sports activities; enjoyment plays an essential role in the process of learning and socialization. As the culture of image took over, the importance of physical activity participation and “physical outcomes” became more and more important. The personal motivation to follow up a healthy lifestyle started to be part of a status narrative as “people of quality” should take care of themselves. Finally, the pandemic drastically diminished personal relations making room for more “screen relations” multiplying the impact of images. The self-presentation and circulation of “fit” body images on social media is increasing as the “fitspiration” (fitspo) – fitness and inspiration – messages shared on social media to encourage and inspire people to exercise (Toffoletti, Thorpe, 2021). A large number of studies were carried out on women bodies’ image, but on the web fitspo is quite equally distributed among women and men. The author would suggest that fitness culture trends towards digitally networked, confuse linear associations between health, enjoyment, socialization, confrontation with social models but more studies would be needed to understand or estimate the connection between the different issues and the (dis)connections generated via digitally mediated practices of bodily self-presentation and EDs in people doing sport activities. The reason for raising the question is that if a sort of control of athletes is possible in the official sport world, in the case of people doing sport activities at home, alone, this is much harder. The invasiveness of social media and the diminishing involvement in personal relations could possibly enhance a negative spiral digging a deeper gap between body and mind. Exploring the sociality of practice and emotions among digital fitness users could possibly offer new insights into the bodily self-presentations culture by crystalizing the nexus between sport activities and sociality. Image-centric media platform are spreading messages on body and culture at great speed; as investigated in different studies, with the increase of body image-related storytelling on the network, several different hashtags and keywords soon appeared to connect in an easy way all the experiences and the people with similar inspirations/needs. EDs is a serious topic and people affected by this problem often talk online about their experiences in search for help or support. Taking advantage of social media could be important to recollect personal histories and data to better investigate the issue.

Conclusions

“The body is for man the first place where the amazement of being oneself manifests itself” (Le Breton, 2005, p. 16). Following Le Breton, we can state that amazement is potentially

positive or negative. Since the imaginary separation between body and mind, the body has progressively become a “white page” on which to leave the trace of signs, rules, desires, dreams. The body as an object of interest in the human sciences, helps us to interpret the complex bond between the individual and society; this communicates identity to the world and is at the same time an interlocutor of the self in the process of creating one’s own identity. This process occurs in the first instance through bodily exteriority, movements, using the body to present itself in a silent manner, showing what degree of approximation to body and cultural models has been achieved. Identity is visible to others, since “the image of oneself is built in the eye of those in front of us, in the mirror that this presents to us. There is no awareness of one’s own identity without this other that reflects and opposes us, facing us. Self and other, identity and otherness go hand in hand and build each other” (Vernant, 2000, p. X).

In the Greek world there was no clear-cut distinction between soul and body. The body, however, was already the representation of human limitation – time was the first enemy of humans while Gods lived a never-ending youth enjoying life and vices without paying the cost. Working to build a perfect body – as ancient heroes and contemporary people – proposes a mechanical idea of one’s biological part. Even through self-care, through sport and sport activities the ideal is pursued by interpreting it from a point of view that concerns exteriority. In an attempt to adapt and perhaps overcome the social models relating to the body, the subject experiences enormous stress and ends up hiding even more an emotional inner discomfort that separates him/her from society and that does not create the bond even when the subject reaches and embodies the model.

The body in postmodern society thus becomes a “mask”, it is no longer just an instrument through which to live. Our showing ourselves to the world is realized in the construction of the body, in transforming it from an instrument of life into an accessory through which to show our ego. The body as a place of exhibition, as a canvas that can be erased, repainted, modified, cut (think of the famous cuts of Burri’s canvases), assembled with different parts and materials, like a do-it-yourself: operations that have as their unique end our “showing ourselves to the world” in a passionate sense. A passion for one’s body, such as to make us take care of the excess, according to the narcissistic logic of postmodernity: that individualistic exaltation that leads to being turned in on oneself, it excludes the other and brings very few possible forms of communication and social relationship (Fornari, 2008, p. 36).

We are faced with a contradictory bodily reality: on the one hand the idea of a body to exhibit, to take care of, on the other a self in search of approval or prey to uncertainty that confuses the acceptance of the self with the achievement of standards. The body seems to prevail in communication for its immediacy. In the case of sports and sporting activities, the importance of performance, as we have seen, does not diminish the importance of exteriority. Flattening the narrative of sporting activities creates traps that debase the role of the game itself, its connection with the sphere of skill, of the search for connection between body and mind. For too long a time, sports’ imaginary has been charged of positive, idealistic thoughts. The sport environment has been too often presented as an optimistic *milieu* in which all the positive approaches can be channelled and multiplied. This storytelling described a dimension in which

many problems could be faced and solved, even problems like integration, health, or politics restoring a sense of balance, peace and stability. Under this cover, a karstic sport culture was asserting itself: above all in Western societies, issues like competitiveness, performance, ideal body image poisoned sport environment. The particular corporeality and imaginary of the body we are living nowadays call for a more cautious storytelling, a brave narrative able to identify personal and collective distresses – actual or possible ones.

The sports world is accustomed to deal with sports injury risks, but unfortunately it is not yet familiar with EDs and is not accustomed to work on body-mind balance. EDs are common and potentially life-threatening conditions which affect both health and sporting performance. As sport-specific risk factors include weight regulation, dieting and performance pressure, sport environment can make athletes more vulnerable to these risk factors compared to non-athletes (Currie, 2010). If it could be quite simple to analyse and start a new path with professional athletes, it will be nearly impossible to reach common people doing sport activities. The only way to reach them would be through a new sport paradigm: it will take time but the particular distress affecting sport activities asks for some intervention. EDs and other sport related distresses are the result of a violent social environment in which people feel they are not allowed to fail and keep working to reach the best possible result. Orthorexia, EDs, performance related stress, continuous comparison with idealistic standards are about an impossible society in which personal value is related to personal goals and their attainment. The sense of isolation lived by people affected by these forms of stress seems to be very high, maybe too high to allow us to talk about society as it should be. Social stressful demands and expectations overflowed from school environment and are affecting leisure-time activities, damaging different forms of interpersonal relationships. Evidences from cited works show that women and young adults are more likely to pay a higher cost for this situation, but this pilot study aims to suggest that some unhealthy behaviour could be easily hidden behind strict “healthy” sports’ protocols. There is a possibility that adults could live the same distress but being able to manage and hide it in a better way. The unbalanced storytelling of the sport world makes this environment particularly favourable to unhealthy behaviours, a different narrative should start to better understand the complexity of personal and collective behaviours.

This work is a preliminary study on the nexus between sport activities and EDs. More studies, a collection of good practices in EDs prevention, screening programs and help are needed, as well as more investigation focusing on the relational side of sport activities as it involves: social expectations, socialization processes, social models and rules to be faced in a conscious way, the reflection of the topic of limit and performance. Sport associations are already working on the issue, but it would be more effective to count on a multidisciplinary approach with a strong sociological and relational point of view.

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