

Professional ethics in physical education: from start to the podium

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Abstract

Health professions underwent an intense institutionalization process (creation, organization and regulation) and most saw their professional councils established and regulated by the mid-20th century. To evaluate physical education professionals' level of knowledge regarding the PE code of ethics, a descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted with 63 physical education professionals working in 27 gyms in the city of Jequié, Bahia, Brazil. Results showed no statistical association between knowing the Code of Ethics for Physical Education Professionals and having a specialization. The interviewed professionals showed reasonable knowledge regarding the code of ethics, considering it an essential element in their professional practice.

Keywords: Physical education and training. Fitness Centers. Ethic, professional. Professional practice. Exercise.

Resumo

Ética profissional em educação física: da largada ao pódio

As profissões da área da saúde passaram por intenso processo de institucionalização (criação, organização e regulamentação) e a maioria delas teve seus conselhos profissionais formados e regulamentadas a partir de meados do século XX. Buscou-se avaliar o nível de conhecimento de profissionais de educação física sobre o código de ética da profissão por meio de estudo descritivo de corte transversal realizado com 63 profissionais de educação física que atuavam em 27 academias de ginástica na cidade de Jequié/BA. Não houve associação estatística entre conhecer o Código de Ética dos Profissionais de Educação Física e ter especialização. Os profissionais entrevistados demonstraram conhecimento razoável do código de ética, considerando-o muito importante em sua prática profissional.

Palavras-chave: Educação física e treinamento. Academias de ginástica. Ética profissional. Prática profissional. Exercício físico.

Resumen

Ética profesional en educación física: de la salida al podio

Las profesiones del área de la salud pasaron por un intenso proceso de institucionalización (creación, organización y regulación), y fue a partir de mediados del siglo XX que se formó y reguló los consejos profesionales de la mayoría de ellas. Este texto pretendió evaluar el nivel de conocimiento de los profesionales de Educación Física sobre el código de ética de la profesión a partir de un estudio transversal descriptivo, realizado con 63 profesionales de Educación Física que trabajaban en 27 gimnasios en la ciudad de Jequié, en Bahía (Brasil). No hubo asociación estadística entre conocer el Código de Ética para Profesionales de Educación Física y tener especialización. Los profesionales entrevistados tienen un conocimiento razonable del código de ética y lo consideran muy importante en su práctica profesional.

Palabras clave: Educación y entrenamiento físico. Centros de acondicionamiento. Ética profesional. Práctica profesional. Ejercicio físico.

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Approval CEP-Uesb 1.580.004

A professional category can be defined as a class or social institution with self-regulating capacity, that is, a group of people who offer certain services, usually based on specific knowledge of work practice. To be entitled as “professionals,” they must undergo a process of higher education or technical training course.

In the context of the health professions, in addition to the training time, which offers the technical skills, joining the professional council of the chosen area is necessary to then be ethically and legally qualified to exercise the occupation¹⁻¹². In this context, professional practices in the health field are shaped based on ethical principles and on the legal framework for the practice of the profession¹³.

By following this logic, all health professions undergo a process of legitimation—creation, organization, and regulation of professional councils. In Brazil, most of them had their supervisory bodies established and regulated from the middle of the 20th century¹⁻¹¹. However, physical education councils were regulated only some decades later¹².

Pierantoni¹⁴ points out that understanding the regulatory and normative aspects of the practices and competencies of health professionals is essential to offer what is most up to date regarding responsibility and ethics. For this purpose, professional councils were created and regulated. In this case, the Federal Council of Physical Education (Confef) and the Regional Councils of Physical Education (Cref), forming the Confef/Cref System¹², were created by Law 9.696/1998¹².

Girardi¹³ asserts that the main function of councils is to supervise the professional practice so that ethical standards are met, maintaining the search for quality in the services offered by physical education professionals (PEP) to society. They have as main attributions: to provide services that favor the development of a healthier lifestyle by using bodily practices (physical activity or physical exercise) and contribute to improve the health conditions and quality of life of their clientele. These professionals should have the guidelines of the Code of Ethics of Physical Education Professionals¹⁵ as reference, which deals with safety, responsibility, technical quality, and ethics in work practices in physical education, whether individual or collective¹⁶.

The knowledge of such attributions is important for the current Brazilian social context, in which

the search for improving quality of life and health, in addition to aesthetic purposes, has increased the number of people who have been practicing systematized physical activities in various environments, especially in gyms. According to International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association (IHRSA)¹⁷, the Brazilian fitness market is one of the segments that stands out in physical education, accounting for more than half of the number of academies in Latin America.

According to Menezes¹⁸, the demand for gyms has been growing in recent decades, attracting the interest of the most varied social and economic segments and creating trends that are reflected in new conceptions of body and health. This new demand reveals the need for constant updating of PEPs that work in these environments to efficiently meet the purposes of such a varied audience: health, aesthetic, or physical conditioning.

In this scenario, in addition to theoretical and practical knowledge, PEPs must have their professional conduct based on ethical principles; however, the literature has a gap regarding ethical competence among these professionals. Thus, this study aims to evaluate the level of knowledge of PEPs about the profession’s code of ethics.

Method

This study presents a section of the master’s thesis entitled *Conhecimento do código de ética profissional em educação física por profissionais de educação física atuantes em academias de ginástica* (Knowledge of the code of professional ethics in physical education by physical education professionals in gyms)¹⁹. It is characterized as descriptive cross-sectional research. The universe of this research comprised 30 gyms located in the municipality of Jequié/BA, which were chosen for being accredited by the Regional Council of Physical Education of the 13th Region (Cref13/BA-SE).

For data collection, two questionnaires were used: one containing 13 closed questions, referring to sociodemographic information and characterization of the study population, whose construction was of responsibility of the author; and the other, validated by Fabiani²⁰, containing ten specific questions about the knowledge

of the Code of Ethics of Physical Education Professionals. In cases of negative answers, the respondents would not need to answer the other questions, which dealt with the level of understanding of the code of ethics and how the professional classified the code regarding its importance for professional practice.

The sample consisted of 63 PEP, 39 male and 24 female, who worked in gyms and were present at the time of the interviews and respected the inclusion and exclusion criteria. To this end, prior contact was established with the owners and technical managers of the accredited gyms to schedule the most appropriate time for the PEP to be interviewed.

After explaining the research objectives, the professionals received the informed consent form. After reading and signing it, the PEP received the questionnaires to be answered individually. The data were collected in between June and July of 2016.

Data tabulation occurred by filling out the database using Microsoft Excel version 2010, which was later transferred to the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.0 for Windows. For the descriptive analysis of the characteristics of the population, the absolute and relative frequencies were calculated.

The differences between the knowledge of the Code of Ethics of Physical Education Professionals and the exploratory variables were verified by the chi-square tests and Fisher's exact test for qualitative variables. In all other tests of inferential statistics, the level of statistical significance of 5% ($p \leq 0.05$) was adopted.

This study complied with the ethical requirements established by Resolution 466/2012 of the National Health Council²¹, which establishes norms and guidelines for research with human beings.

Results

Regarding sociodemographic characteristics, male individuals (61.9%), adults between 20 and 30 years (54%), with 31.6 years as the mean age, and single individuals (60.34%) predominated, with most PEPs having a specialization degree. In total, 75.8% of them also reported not engaging in another professional activity (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive data regarding the knowledge of the Code of Ethics of Physical Education Professionals by PEP working in gyms (Jequié/BA, 2016)

Knowledge of the Code of Ethics of Physical Education Professionals	No.	%
Did you join the Cref after completing the course?		
Yes	54	85.7
No	9	14.3
Do you see benefit from joining Cref?		
Yes	19	30.2
No	44	69.8
Would you appeal to Cref if you were forced to breach the code of ethics?		
Yes	46	74.2
No	17	25.8
Would you report institutions incompatible with the code of ethics to Confef/Cref?		
Yes	51	81
No	12	19
Would declare ethical misconduct before Confef/Cref?		
Yes	50	79.4
No	9	14.3
No answer	4	6.3
Do you know the code of ethics?		
Yes	44	69.8
No	19	30.2
Level of understanding of the code of ethics		
Good	16	37.2
Reasonable	27	62.8
Classification of the code of professional ethics		
Very important	20	46.5
Important	19	44.2
Not very important	4	9.3

Cref: Regional Councils of Physical Education; Confef: Federal Council of Physical Education

Most PEP claimed to have joined Cref after graduation, even when claiming to see no benefit in the affiliation. They would appeal to Cref if forced to breach the code of ethics of PEPs, and most said they would report to Confef/Cref physical education institutions incompatible with



the code and would declare ethical misconduct in their professional activities before the Confef/Cref.

The share of PEP who do not know the Code of Ethics of Physical Education Professionals was 30.2% and, regarding the level of understanding of the code,

37.2% stated that they had a good understanding and 46.5% pointed out that the code is very important for their professional practice. Table 2 shows the values of association between knowledge of the code of professional ethics and exploratory variables.

Table 2. Association between knowledge of the code of ethics and exploratory variables of the study (Jequié/BA, 2016)

Variables	Know the Code of Ethics of Physical Education Professionals						Total	
	YES		NO		p-value	N	%	
	N	%	N	%				
Gender	0.441*							
Male	28	71.8%	11	28.2%		39	61.9%	
Female	15	62.5%	9	37.5%		24	38.1%	
Specialization	0.086*							
Yes	26	78.8%	7	21.2%		33	53.2%	
No	17	58.6%	13	41.4%		30	46.8%	
Engages in another professional activity	0.367*							
Yes	9	60%	6	40%		15	24.2%	
No	34	72.3%	13	27.7%		47	75.8%	
Joined Cref after graduation	0.313**							
Yes	38	72.2%	16	27.8%		54	85.7%	
No	5	55.6%	4	44.4%		9	14.3%	
Benefit in Cref membership	0.005**							
Yes	18	94.7%	1	5.3%		19	30.2%	
No	25	59.1%	19	40.9%		44	69.8%	
I would appeal to Cref	>0.001**							
Yes	42	91.3%	4	8.7%		46	74.1%	
No	1	12.5%	15	87.5%		16	25.9%	
I would report to Cref	>0.001**							
Yes	41	80.4%	10	19.6%		51	80.9%	
No	2	25.0%	9	75.0%		11	19.1%	
Declare ethical misconduct before the Confef/Cref	>0.001**							
Yes	40	80.0%	11	20.0%		51	84.7%	
No	1	11.1%	8	89.9%		9	15.3%	
Age in categories	0.128*							
20-30 years	20	60.6%	13	39.4%		33	52.3%	
31-40 years	19	80.0%	6	20.0%		25	39.6%	
41 years or older	4	80.0%	1	20.0%		5	8.1%	
Year of completion of courses by category	0.348*							
2002-2006	9	81.8%	2	18.2%		11	17.8%	
2007-2011	11	68.8%	5	31.2%		16	25.8%	
2012-2016	23	65.7%	12	34.3%		35	56.4%	

Cref: Federal Council of Physical Education; * Pearson chi-square; ** Fisher's exact test

Results showed no statistical association between knowing the Code of Ethics for Physical Education Professionals and the exploratory variable—having a specialization—or between age and knowledge of the code. However, the proportions presented show that the level of knowledge of the code of ethics was higher in the categories in which the professionals were older and had finished their undergraduate course longer ago.

Discussion

Professional councils are federal authorities that have the power to discipline their members and, among their main functions, stand out: grant authorization and issue registration to professionals; authorize or restrict professional performance by resolutions; create codes that guide the conduct of the professional. These are codes of ethics that, in turn, have the function of contributing to professional practice based on ethical reflections that can guarantee protection to society, guiding professionals to a good professional conduct¹³.

Thus, joining the Cref is indispensable before the law and according to the standards of good conduct recommended by the Code of Ethics of Physical Education Professionals. In this study, 85.7% of PEPs stated that they had joined Cref shortly after completing graduation, clashing with the results obtained in the studies of Bastos and Voser²², Santos and collaborators²³ and Vieira and Carneiro²⁴, who investigated PEPs who worked in gyms in the cities of Pelotas/RS, and Parintins/AM, and in the microregion of Ubá/MG, and found, respectively, 50.58%, 66.7%, and 70% of PEPs without registration in the Cref.

These data show that illegality in professional performance in physical education is a reality in the contexts presented, with high rates among PEPs, also evidencing the lack of standard regarding the ethical-legal attitude of these PEPs. The Cref should also concentrate efforts on education and information about the importance of the PEP being properly registered, highlighting the implications of the lack of registration and encouraging PEP who agree with this perspective to report irregularities. On another “battlefront,” planning,

organizing, and executing the surveillance process is necessary.

In this study, the PEPs who claimed to know the Code of Ethics of Physical Education Professionals had positive responses as to what is recommended by the standard and among those who see benefits when joining Cref, 94.7% know the code of ethics of the profession. Girardi¹³ states that the Federal Constitution defends as a fundamental right the free exercise of any work, occupation, or profession, meeting the professional qualifications recommended by law, that is, being affiliated to the council guarantees the free exercise by legal support.

This study found that knowing the code of ethics of the PEP is associated with ethical action, to the extent that 74.2% of the professionals answered that they would resort to Cref if forced to breach it; 80.9% stated that they would report to Confef institutions linked to PE that were in disagreement with the guidelines of the normative code of the profession; and 84.7% answered that they would declare ethical misconduct in their professional activities before Confef, confirming the statement of knowledge of the code of ethics. This corroborates what is recommended in Chapter III of the Code of Ethics of Physical Education Professionals, according to which every PEP must watch over the image of the professional and the profession and contribute to improve its institutions and declare ethical misconduct before the council¹⁵.

Although 69.8% of PEPs claimed to know the code of ethics, a significant 30.2% answered that they do not know it, which may be due to the lack of discussion in the educational institutions. In this sense, Silva and collaborators²⁵ analyzed the teaching of ethics and bioethics subjects in physical education courses at federal universities in Brazil and concluded that the offer of these disciplines in their curricular matrices is scarce and with little or no standardization. For Santin²⁶, ethics does not yet have guaranteed space in undergraduate courses in PE, and this is reflected in the scarce production of theses and dissertations on the subject.

The reality should be different, given the existence of Confef resolutions, such as Resolution 255/2013²⁷, which points out the importance of professional training, emphasizing that the

dimensions of ethical competence are essential for the proper performance of specific functions and proper to professional practice, with safety, competence, and responsibility.

Despite the scarcity of studies and scientific production on the subject in Brazil, 62.8% of the interviewees in this study stated that they had reasonable knowledge of the Code of Ethics of Physical Education Professionals. Of these, 90.7% answered that knowledge of the code is “very important” or “important” for their professional practice.

The code promotes respect for the life, dignity, integrity, and rights of the individual. Respect for ethics is an indispensable precept for PEPs to succeed in their professional intervention and contribute to better health conditions of the population with actions aimed at the protection, prevention, and promotion of health with responsibility and ethics²⁷.

Professionals who stated that the code of professional ethics has little importance for their practice represented 9.3%, and they can put the health or physical integrity of people who use their services at risk. Although physical education has

earned the right to regulation as a profession— with rights and duties before society—, following the necessary path to do so, some scenarios need more attention so that good professional practices in physical education can be effected.

The integration between the sectors can strengthen the practice of the PEP regarding quality and ethical-legal responsibility. In this context, a combination between higher education institutions is suggested to offer more disciplines regarding ethics and bioethics. For example, Confef and Cref can plan education and surveillance actions, and it is up to graduate programs to provide information that push these actions.

Final considerations

This study found that 90.7% of the PEPs that participated in the research have reasonable knowledge of the Code of Ethics of Physical Education Professionals, considering it important or very important for their professional practice. However, most of these professionals (30.2%) stated that they did not know the code of ethics.


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The authors participated together in the preparation of this article.

Received: 3.15.2022

Revised: 9.2.2022

Approved: 9.2.2022