

# THE ROLE OF TIME AND EXPERIENCE TO THE GYMNASTICS FOR ALL PRACTICE: BUILDING A SENSE OF COLLECTIVITY

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*Special article*

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## **Abstract**

*This essay aims to discuss the role of two sociological categories, time and experience, in a particular context of a non-competitive gymnastics practice (Gymnastics for All - GfA). Understanding GfA as a group activity, the collective participation becomes a key element to allow the participants to share experiences in an extended time. This collective experience in GfA seems to be directly related to development and maintenance of social relations and promotion of the sense of belonging, which reinforce GfA as a body practice that defies the performance and the individualization logic that is overly experienced in the contemporary society.*

**Keywords:** *non-competitive sports, sense of belonging, process, sociology.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The benefits of regular physical activity for health and social well-being are indisputable and have been exhaustively confirmed by science (Booth, Roberts & Laye 2012; Fletcher, Blair, Blumenthal, Caspersen & Chaitman, 1992; Hallal, Andersen, Bull, Gutholld, Haskell & Ekelund, 2012; Kodama et al., 2009; Lee, Shiroma, Lobelo, Puska, Blair & Katzmarzyk, 2012). In addition, several studies show that long-term adherence of participants in sports and physical activities (PA) programs is crucial, even more important than pursuing, encouraging or starting the participation (Aily, Carnaz, Farche & Takahashi, 2017; Malina, 2001; Room et al., 2017; Schutzer & Graves, 2004; Wankel, 1993).

The long-term adherence to sports and PA programs has been extensively addressed, especially in researches related to motivation (Dacey, Baltzell & Zaichkowsky, 2008; Dishman, 1991;

Kilpatrick, Hebert & Jacobsen., 2002; Ryan, Frederick, Lepes, Noel & Sheldon, 1997). In fact, physiological, psychological and social benefits, including improvements in the quality of life, are often “promised” by sports and PA programs, but they are conditioned to regular and long-term participation. In this sense, motivation is crucial to have a consistent participation and, consequently, to development of healthier habits and behaviors (Frederick, Morrison, & Manning, 1996).

A long-term participation is the base to the competitive sports, and it needs to be associated with motivation regardless of the performance level achieved (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002). For that reason, participation in sports programs is mainly studied in the competitive context, giving special attention to the high-level athletes. However, pleasure and long-term participation also lies on the base of

“Sports for All” (Hartmann-Tews, 2002) but only few studies address these questions.

In the last three decades, the Sports for All (SfA) movement has been promoting mass participation on PA and sports programs, mainly as a leisure practice (Green, 2006; Vuori, Lankenau & Pratt 2004). Even though competition can be part of SfA, the non-competitive activities represent the most important group of practices to promote a society physically active. In this context, Gymnastics for All (GfA) as a non-competitive gymnastics discipline is able to gather practitioners worldwide, combining different age groups in all levels of practice (FIG, 2018), promoting an active lifestyle (Jürgen, 1985, Wichmann, 2015).

Based on the facts above, this essay aims to discuss the role of two sociological categories for GfA practice: time and experience. And, how these elements can influence the practitioners in long-term adherence and contribute to the emergence of collectivity sense among them.

## WHAT KIND OF GYMNASTICS FOR ALL ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

Different understandings about GfA were socially constructed since the XIX century showing particular historical and cultural backgrounds about its practice. For some European countries with a long-standing tradition in Gymnastics, GfA is intertwined as a regular PA performed under supervision based on a systematic methodology, which can be practiced by all age groups promoting health and well-being (Bonde, 2006; Bukh, 1962; Wichmann, 2014). Based on Corbin, Courtine & Vigarello (2006), GfA can also be considered a fundamental part of the physical culture in those countries, combining PA traditions with local folk activities (Gajdoš, Provaznikova & Banjak, 2012). However, in many other places worldwide, the non-competitive

gymnastics practice has been recently incorporated into the physical culture. From a sociological perspective, it is important to consider these differences.

In America, for instance, gymnastics practice was mainly based on European references, implemented through the migratory process since the late nineteenth century (Gems, Borish & Pfister, 2015; Hoffman, 2015; Quitzau, 2013), which certainly influenced the consolidation of competitive gymnastics disciplines, while GfA became less important. In Brazil, non-competitive gymnastics was considered only at the end of the 20th century, around the 1980s (Souza, 1997). First in higher education courses of Physical Education and, years later, in schools and sports clubs, it has been developed in many places as a tool for social and educational development, providing an inclusive sport practice and, consequently, more participation in gymnastics (Patrício, 2016).

So that, GfA represents non-competitive gymnastics that gathers everyone to participate. It can be understood as a collective practice where people create gymnastics choreographies to display in events, and for that reason it also can be understood as an expressive practice (Mateu & Bortoleto, 2017). Although GfA is internationally governed by the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG, 2018), it does not have a scoring system (Code of Points) as happen with the competitive gymnastics disciplines. For that reason, GfA practice allows a huge diversity of movements, styles, cultural backgrounds and even greater creative freedom and integration of the cultural and aesthetic elements of each group of participants (Wichmann & Jarvis, 2014). Those characteristics can be seen clearly at the GfA festivals (Patrício, Bortoleto & Carbinatto, 2016).

In general, GfA practice is a group activity (Bortoleto, 2008; FIG, 2018) essentially collaborative as suggested by the theory proposed by Parlebas (2001).

Consequently the relationship among practitioners needs to ensure a positive collaboration, contributing to the development of social skills, and thereby better group performance. From this perspective, it seems reasonable to recognize the relevance of the collective dimension to GfA (Menegaldo, 2018). According to the critical theory of Sennett (2012), we understand that GfA could become an important tool to development of the communication and cooperation among its participants.

Considering this, the adherence in GfA seems to be associated with development of social bonds and, sometimes, with the sense of collectivity. Recently, Bortoleto et al (2019) suggested that the motivation to participate in GfA programs and events are related to the long period of time that people are able to spend together – social affiliation and recognition – and also to the sense of belonging. As a group activity, the opportunity to exchange experiences reinforce the social benefits of GfA (Wichmann, 2015) and in this sense GfA can be more than a PA program since it combines physical and social development. This combination depends on how experiences are built and shared over time in each GfA group.

## THINKING ABOUT TIME AND EXPERIENCE IN GYMNASTICS FOR ALL

Gymnastics for All offers the possibility to have a “life-long” PA participation (FIG, 2018). The long-term experiences go beyond the practical aspects as to learn gymnastics skills or display choreographies, given the possibility of sharing the individual experiences in order to develop the group itself. In this sense, each group needs to find its own way to accomplish it.

The individual experiences can enrich the participation process especially when participants act actively and openly to share these experiences among the

group. The shared experiences become a collective knowledge that reinforces cooperation and social engagement. When GfA groups empower their members showing that active participation is positive, the social relations strengthened. In this sense, the GfA practice goes beyond physical training, learning techniques, or development of group choreography. Over time, the way each group operates can generate a collective identity. In this sense, the more individual experiences<sup>1</sup> are shared; closer the group will be to have a “common language”. This process reinforces the social bonds, group cohesion and improvement of the quality of group performance (Parlebas, 2001).

This may seem obvious, but in many cases, the group – without any intention – ignores these knowledges, sometimes to follow a technique and the logic predetermined by coaches or older members, very typical in the competitive sports context. However, it is crucial to remember: GfA should promote accessibility, inclusion and participation, so its practitioners are not necessarily former gymnasts, but participants with a diverse of experiences.

Thus, GfA tends to boost participants’ sense of belonging and increase their commitment to the group in the long-term, allowing the strengthening of the social relations of the participants (Menegaldo, 2018). In this sense, experiences that can lead to a sense of collectivity in GfA go

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<sup>1</sup> These experiences can be as many different as possible, including skills from other gymnastics disciplines, or in other sports, or even from a personal life such as sewing, drawing or play music. Different techniques and aesthetics can merge into new creations. There is no limitations to the GfA practice so individual experiences matter and can help the group development. In this sense, personal prior experiences in theatre, dance or music for instance should be considered an advantage to the group. When personal backgrounds add up, the choreography process can also be more creative.

beyond a simple “individual experience”, getting closer to what Benjamin (1999) called as “a shared experience”. In his book entitled “Experience and Poverty” (1999), Benjamin argues that experience is connected to communication and to the transmission of experiences down from one generation to the next using narratives, something that has been dramatically reduced in modern society, according to him. If the experience is related to act of sharing and to the ability to turn out “spontaneous narratives”, it needs to be a collectively constructed experience.

From the practical point of view, it is common to see GfA groups that have participants who have just joined the group and others whose participation has been going on for years. The relationships between the participants can be very complex, showing huge challenges in the sharing experiences process. In general, the most experienced group members usually take over the responsibility of sharing their knowledge with others, leading the process. However, the GfA groups are constantly exposed to renew and leverage by ideas coming from new members, so that we believe the dynamics of experience exchange seems to be strongly influenced by time, and therefore by the adherence and long-term participation.

Since cooperation and empathy, needed for the collectivity development, are slowly built, the time – or extended time participation – becomes a very important aspect (Sennett, 1998). Therefore, time has a wide role ensuring the engagement required for sharing experiences, especially when groups include novice gymnasts simultaneously with other more experienced. The newcomers need to recognize the situations already framed into the group finding the way and the time to bring their contributions. At the same time, experienced members need to be opened to new ideas and see the potential in contributions coming from the new ones. It

is really important to ensure an environment where all of them can express opinions and participate in group decisions.

In the opposite direction, short-term experiences often result in superficial relationship or convenient bonds (Sennett, 2012). Long-term adherence leads to more quality time spent together in the group. In other words:

Practice unfolds in time and it has all the correlative properties, such as irreversibility, that synchronization destroys. Its temporal structure, that is, its rhythm, its tempo, and above all its directionality, is constitutive of its meaning [...] In short, because it is entirely immersed in the current of time, practice is inseparable from temporality, not only because it is played out in time, but also because it plays strategically with time and especially with tempo (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 81).

Time should be considered as a key element for development of GfA, mainly when is known that social relations are hardly strengthened in short periods. Considering this, the GfA practice does not have to follow the pattern observed in competitive sport, which is often determined by the optimization of the use of time and with the pressure to make the processes faster and more efficient. Obviously, depending on the goals, structure, context and traditions of each group, the time management can change drastically. In this case, if the group’s approach to GfA is based on a high-performance mentality, focusing in the results, probably time will be strictly controlled to optimize its use. In cases like that, when the outcomes are a priority, the performance can be increased, but social development can be greatly impaired.

However, when GfA practice is developed in a longer and more flexible time, the characteristics of social relations change radically, providing space to participants’ diversity and heterogeneity. In this perspective, participants take the

time they need, which goes against current trends of focusing on the immediate moment (Sennett, 1998). It is also an opportunity to resist the pressure of modern life, when time is always short (Bauman, 2001; 2000). The logic of performance and productivity does not apply to GfA, where time is relative, and its control is not so stricted<sup>2</sup>. The discussion proposed by Sennett (1998) support our opinion on that:

One reason for this demeaning superficiality is the disorganization of time. Time's arrow is broken; it has no trajectory in a continually re-engineered, routine-hating, short-term political economy. People feel the lack of sustained human relations and durable purposes. The people I've so far described have all tried to find the depth of time beneath the surface, if only by registering unease and anxiety about the present (Sennett, 1998, p. 99).

To experience the "extended time", as suggested by Bauman (2000), first the group needs to want it. This decision requires from the members to be patient, flexible and opened to the dialogue: "the playing field of talk needs to be open and accessible" (Sennett, 1998, p. 109). Back to GfA, the collective process in extended time, enlarges the social relations development rather than short-superficial experiences. Therefore, we must be aware of the complexity of these relations, understanding that the "Groups tend to hold together through keeping to the surface of things; shared superficiality keeps people together by avoiding difficult, divisive, personal questions" (Sennett, 1998, p. 110). The challenge is the need to develop different ways in which participants can learn how to become part of the group, incorporating a cooperative way to work in order to improving their social abilities. We believe that the long-term participation is critical

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<sup>2</sup>Certainly, some Michel Foucault's ideas could contribute to the analysis, but this essay will not go further into this topic.

to increase the group engagement, to develop a collective sense and consequently to strengthen the recognition as well the sense of belonging. This extended time seems to be very important to establish stronger and stable social relationships.

### **GYMNASTICS FOR ALL AS A COUNTERPOINT TO THE INDIVIDUALIZATION PROCESS**

The emphasis on the process can reveal a unique feature of GfA: the power of the collective experience. The development of the sense of collectivity is directly linked to the long-term practice and the individual experience sharing. In this sense, the social relations experienced in GfA reinforce it as an educational tool for social development (Menegaldo, 2018).

Therefore, GfA becomes a practice that may oppose the individualization process prevalent in our society (Beck, 2003), process that is criticized by various sociologists (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1990; Flint & Powell, 2013; Lee, 2005; Schwartz, Coté & Arnett, 2005). According to Bauman (2001), the "individualized society" leads to excess, lack of time and creativity, immediatism and intolerance to difference. Based on the reproduction of traditional models and references, another important trend is relentless pursuit of the outcome.

As suggested by Parlebas (2001) theory, the cooperative practices that include GfA must be understood more than a simple PA or group sports practice. In other words, GfA practitioners can achieve improvements that go beyond the physical health benefits, as social recognition (Honneth, 1995), development of horizontal cooperative relations (Sennett, 2012) and social development (Bortoleto et al, 2019; Wichmann, 2014; 2015).

A long-term practice is important to increase communication skills and to develop a collective sense, encouraging people to spend time together and to foster

social relations through gymnastics. The extended time allows multiple and deeper individual experiences exchanges. So that, once the GfA group chooses a collective approach, the practice becomes dynamic, being constantly modified by its members. The GfA understanding proposed by us demands a deeply commitment from the gymnasts themselves (Sennett, 1998).

The mentioned commitment is related to the improvement of social skills, pushing participants to work together and to improve cooperation, empathy, and dialogic relationships (Sennett, 2012). It is associated with regular exercise of cooperation. Even more, it is about time and energy that the practitioners dedicate to the group, and therefore how much they engage themselves in the group tasks and activities. So that, even health and quality of life improvement are associated to the GfA practice (FIG, 2018), the development of social skills may represent the major impact of GfA for contemporary society. This is why it does not seem strange to us that social recognition and the sense of belonging become important motivations to the participants' engagement (Bortoleto et al., 2019; Wichmann, 2015).

We believe that GfA can be considered an alternative to the modern sports trends based in strict rules that lead to time control, precise scoring system, highlighting competition and performance (Guttmann, 1978). For those groups that find a way to develop the GfA social potential, through a flexible use of time and body, the cooperative experience can become an important motivation to have a long-life practice. In conclusion, GfA allows individual and social development, offering in many cases a deep collective experience to its participants.

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