

What kind of body is this? Brief reflections on body normativity, ableism, and common sense

¿Qué tipo de cuerpo es este? Breves reflexiones sobre la normatividad corporal, el capacitismo y el sentido común

Que corpo é esse? Breves reflexões sobre corponormatividade, capacitismo e senso comum

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Abstract

This article aims to reflect on how body normativity, naturalized by common sense, is revealed in the epistemological construction of ableism. It is anchored in the philosophical framework of the science of Rubem Alves. The Social Model of Disability Theory and Crip Theory, which address the idea of body normativity, were also used. A relationship between ableism and vulnerabilities is evidenced through the "pathologization" of bodies and the charitable conceptions that emerge from the establishment of certain social standards related to bodies. It can be stated that the epistemological construction of ableism, at a scientific level, is not based on the common sense of people with disabilities, but rather on the hegemonic common sense of society, which hinders a non-stereotypical and non-"pathologizing" view of the individual. Although debates on ableism are gaining ground in scientific discussions, these debates are still little known in the common sense, which hinders the production of critical reflections on their social consequences. Therefore, giving voice to people with disabilities, to ensure their social participation, emerges as one of the main anti-ableist strategies, promoting the deconstruction of stereotypes and the appreciation of body diversity.

Descriptors: People with Disabilities; Social Inclusion; Social Norms; Disability Discrimination; Social Sciences.

Resumen

Este artículo reflexiona sobre cómo la normatividad corporal, naturalizada por el sentido común, se manifiesta en la construcción epistemológica del capacitismo. Se fundamenta en el marco filosófico de la ciencia de Rubem Alves. También se recurre al Modelo Social de la Teoría de la Discapacidad y a la Teoría Crip, que abordan la idea de la normatividad corporal. Se evidencia una relación entre capacitismo y vulnerabilidades a través de la patologización de los cuerpos y las concepciones caritativas que surgen del establecimiento de ciertos estándares sociales relacionados con ellos. Se puede afirmar que la construcción epistemológica del capacitismo, a nivel científico, no se basa en el sentido común de las personas con discapacidad, sino en el sentido común hegemónico de la sociedad, que obstaculiza una visión no estereotipada y no patologizante del individuo. Si bien los debates sobre el capacitismo están ganando terreno en las discusiones científicas, aún son poco conocidos en el sentido común, lo que dificulta la generación de reflexiones críticas sobre sus consecuencias sociales. Por lo tanto, dar voz a las personas con discapacidad, para asegurar su participación social, surge como una de las principales estrategias anticapacitistas, promoviendo la deconstrucción de estereotipos y la valoración de la diversidad corporal.

Descriptores: Personas con Discapacidad; Inclusión Social; Normas Sociales; Capacitismo; Ciencias Sociales.

Resumo

O presente artigo se propõe a refletir sobre como a corponormatividade, naturalizada pelo senso comum se revela na construção epistemológica do capacitismo. Ancorou-se no referencial filosófico da ciência de Rubem Alves. Também foram utilizadas a Teoria do Modelo Social da Deficiência e a Teoria Crip, que trazem a ideia de corponormatividade. Evidencia-se uma relação entre capacitismo e vulnerabilidades através da "patologização" dos corpos e das concepções caritativas que emergem a partir do estabelecimento de determinados padrões sociais relacionados aos corpos. Pode-se afirmar que a construção epistemológica do capacitismo, em nível científico, não se baseia no senso comum das pessoas com deficiência, mas sim no senso comum hegemônico da sociedade, o que dificulta o olhar não estereotipado e não "patologizante" do ser. Apesar dos debates sobre capacitismo estarem ganhando espaço nas discussões científicas, tais debates ainda são pouco conhecidos no senso comum, o que dificulta a produção de reflexões críticas sobre suas consequências sociais. Portanto, dar voz às pessoas com deficiência, de forma a assegurar suas participações sociais, emerge como uma das principais estratégias anticapacitistas, que promovem a desconstrução de estereótipos e a valorização da diversidade dos corpos.

Descriptores: Pessoas com Deficiência; Inclusão Social; Normas Sociais; Capacitismo; Ciências Sociais.



Introduction

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which took place in 2008, materialized in the Brazilian Law on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (Statute of Persons with Disabilities) – Law No. 13.146, of July 6, 2015. The concept of disability is changing, moving away from a medical model, in which disability is understood as a limitation of the individual, towards a more comprehensive social model. The second paragraph of this law alters the concept of disability. Disability is experiencing a moment of reinvention due to the struggle of people with disabilities¹.

A person with a disability is someone who has long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairment which, in interaction with one or more barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others¹ (Art. 2).

The idea of binary categories is socially and historically constructed, such as heterosexuality/homosexuality and ability/disability. "Compulsory heterosexuality" is an expression that reinforces the obligation of Western binarism, which disregards gender plurality according to local culture and social influence. Regarding disability, the term "compulsory corporeality" could be used as a translation of the English expression "compulsory able-bodiedness," proposed by McRuer. However, this translation does not accurately express the hegemonic standard of bodies without disabilities, that is, those considered capable or incapable of performing certain actions²⁻⁴.

Just as racism comes from race and sexism from sex, the word "capable," a translation of "able," serves to understand the category of ableism, which can be associated with the production of power and relates to the theme of the body and an idea of a perfect bodily/functional standard. In this way, ableism can be seen as a form of oppression that defines the individual by the belief that people with disabilities are incapable of performing different activities, since they have bodies or minds outside the accepted norm⁴⁻⁶.

Ableism can appear subtly and subliminally, or even in an evident and obvious way. This prejudice is still naturalized and acceptable through common sense, linking the image of a person with a disability to defective bodies incapable of being productive, based on socially constructed stigmas. Internalized, it stems from a social difficulty in questioning differences, and results in viewing people with disabilities as less human or less capable beings^{4,5}.

Common sense and science play a fundamental role in society, because when they work together, they can help transform opinions and knowledge⁷. To understand common sense, it is necessary to immerse oneself in a problem, starting with questioning and seeking solutions. Understanding the issues surrounding common sense allows for a better understanding of science⁸.

Learning science is a progressive process of common sense, where it is possible to teach and learn, which consists of maintaining and modifying already possessed capacities or skills. The understanding of disability

permeates a regulatory process of bodies, through beauty and functionality standards established by society that, imbued with common sense, guide practices, behaviors, and identities that define us as capable or incapable⁸.

As situations arise that trigger questions, the relevance of thought, the search for solutions, and the connection between the answer and nature and society become more apparent. Although discussions about ableism and the inclusion of people with disabilities are not recent, they are still timid. Therefore, this study sought to develop possible articulations between the Social Model of Disability, feminist theories, and common sense. Thus, the objective of this study is to reflect on how body normativity, naturalized by common sense, is revealed in the epistemological construction of ableism.

Methodology

This is a theoretical reflection anchored in Rubem Alves' philosophical framework of science, composed of the following triad: science, the construction of scientific knowledge, and common sense. Given the specificity and the need for immersion and theoretical understanding of the subject, the Social Model of Disability Theory and Crip Theory, which introduce the idea of body normativity, were also used.

Thus, the production of these reflections occurred through a systematic process of reading, comparing, and articulating the main concepts discussed in the selected theoretical fields. The thematic categories discussed in this study emerged from an interpretative movement, in which convergent core meanings were identified among the theoretical frameworks, especially regarding body normativity and the influence of common sense on the understanding of disability. This interpretative process is aimed at constructing critical and interdisciplinary analysis capable of engaging with philosophy, sociology, and the health sciences.

Consistent argumentation, conceptual clarity, and the social relevance of the topic were adopted as criteria for theoretical validity, allowing the reflection to remain aligned with the ethical and epistemological principles in the field of human and social sciences. By prioritizing the analysis of concepts and discourses, the methodology used sought not only to understand the structure of ableism but also to contribute to the production of anti-ableist and emancipatory knowledge.

Results and Discussion

The discussion presented below is organized into two thematic categories, which are interconnected in a complementary manner. The first, which we have titled "Body normativity and ableism: understanding from the perspective of Crip Theory and its relationship with the Biomedical and Social Model of Disability," addresses how normative discourses about the body and disability are produced and sustained by biomedical and social logics that reinforce exclusion.

In the second thematic category, which we titled "Science and common sense: interfaces between assistance



to people with disabilities and ableism," we seek to reflect on the epistemological and practical implications of such conceptions in the scientific and assistance fields, highlighting how common sense and technical knowledge intertwine in the perpetuation (or deconstruction) of ableist patterns. Together, these categories discussed provide an understanding of the complex interplay between body, science, and society, thus highlighting the urgency of an anti-ableist and emancipatory reading of disability.

Body normativity and ableism: understanding from the perspective of Crip Theory and its relationship with the Biomedical and Social Model of Disability.

Ableism manifests itself through prejudiced attitudes that discriminate against people with disabilities, by hierarchizing individuals based on a body standard sustained by ideals of beauty and functional capacity. This ideal body, however, is not neutral: it responds to a productivist logic instituted by the capitalist economic system, in which the valued bodies are those capable of being exploited to their maximum productivity⁴.

The ableist conception is closely linked to the idea of body normativity, which classifies the bodies of people with disabilities as inferior, incapable, incomplete, and in need of repair, when compared to bodies that are socially standardized as functional⁴.

The ableist conception is closely linked to the idea of body normativity, which classifies the bodies of people with disabilities as inferior, incapable, incomplete, and in need of repair, when compared to bodies that are socially standardized as functional⁹. Therefore, one must consider that there are various ways of existing, and none is established at the expense of another.

Ableism presents an ideal of the subject sustained by normative capabilities compulsorily anchored in biomedical discourses; in other words, it assumes that ableism is structural and structuring¹⁰. From an ableist perspective, disability is something that is not natural; that is, it is seen as an illness, incapacity, or limitation⁴.

As pessoas com deficiência, ao longo da história, têm Having experienced processes of oppression and, simultaneously, a political and social struggle for the guarantee of their rights, the anti-ableist perspective proposes breaking with this exclusionary logic by questioning bodily normativity and the systems that sustain inequality. This perspective has the potential to create fissures in different fields of knowledge, contributing to the construction of a society that values and embraces the diversity of bodies¹⁰.

Discussions about the inclusion of people with disabilities in society find space within feminist epistemologies¹¹. Discussions about the inclusion of people with disabilities in society find space within feminist epistemologies¹². This research seeks to understand how bodies and disabilities have been conceived. This search aims to break with binary oppositions based on the assumptions of Queer Theory. Guacira Lopes Louro states that queer "is a way of thinking and being that challenges the

regulatory norms of society, that embraces the discomfort of ambiguity"^{13:8}.

The separation between body and mind cannot be sustained, since the body is always traversed by meanings attributed to it in the social sphere¹⁴. Thus, it is not a matter of conceiving of it as a natural or pre-established entity, but as a construction produced by discourses, practices, and cultural norms that regulate and perform its existence.

The term "crip" is derived from the English word "cripple," which can be translated as "crippled." It thus takes on an aggressive and pejorative connotation, intentionally to highlight the crip's commitment to developing a critique of the normalization of the body against all those who deviate from the norm⁴.

The term was initially used to refer to people with physical disabilities, but it has now expanded to encompass sensory and intellectual disabilities. The use of the term "crip" as a verb can be understood as questioning, from an anti-ableist perspective, established standards of normality¹².

The reinterpretation of different forms of embodiment must go beyond those that are socially valued¹². However, as Kafer notes¹⁵, ableism is still often understood only at an individual level, and not as an expression of structural inequality. This limited perspective contributes to the depoliticization of disability, which continues to be interpreted mostly through the lens of the biomedical model. Within this framework, body normativity establishes standards that define which bodies are considered legitimate, while science tends to reduce disability to a problem to be corrected or eradicated.

In the biomedical model, disability would be the logical and natural consequence of a damaged body; it would be the physical incapacity that leads the individual to a series of social disadvantages¹⁶. To reduce these disadvantages, interventions should be made in this body to promote (when possible) its optimal functioning.

The International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps: A Manual for the Classification of the Consequences of Diseases (ICIDH), developed in 1976 by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a complementary part of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), is the main document that offers its own conceptions of disability as any temporary or permanent loss or abnormality of a physical structure or physiological, psychological or anatomical function. Today, the document is no longer used, but in some way, it still expresses the common understanding of what disability is, as something still belonging to the domain of the body. Unfortunately, this formal discrediting of the document does not represent a change in conception on a socially broad scale. There is an interest in denaturalizing this understanding of disability through the Biomedical Model by means of a Social Model¹⁶.

The Social Model of Disability can be understood as the understanding of a lifestyle imposed on a person with certain physical impairments, marked by exclusion and oppression. The main intervention should be made in society, and not on the body of that individual, to ensure the full participation of people with disabilities¹⁶.



Although Crip Theory opposes the biomedical model in its understanding of disability, it also does not fully adopt the social model. The theory acknowledges that the environment contributes to processes of exclusion but proposes that both injury and disability should be understood as social constructs. Thus, it is not possible to think about injury without reflecting on the social meanings attributed to it.

The social model disregards physical aspects that impact bodies and that are not resolved by adapting architectural or attitudinal barriers. This disregard marginalizes people with disabilities who seek adaptation strategies^{15,17}.

It is worth noting that architectural barriers are constructed obstacles that prevent or hinder people's accessibility. Furthermore, the attitudes and behaviors of individuals that impede another person's access, whether intentional or not, would constitute attitudinal barriers, while organizational barriers would be those that hinder a particular population's access to a service¹⁸. One example would be the lack of qualified professionals to care for a person with a disability, whose care transcends disability and the idea of body normativity.

Gesser¹⁹ considers that ableism contributes to the production of vulnerabilities by holding people with disabilities responsible for their condition and for adapting their bodies to normative standards through various strategies. Bodies are seen as objects of medical interventions to correct supposed deviations, through the pathologization of bodies and charitable conceptions that emerge from the establishment of certain social standards.

Considering the interconnectedness of disability studies and feminist and gender studies allows for a more complex perspective on social issues. Differences should not be understood as something that needs to be normalized or excluded from society, but as a possible expression of life⁴. From these reflections, body normativity, by establishing itself as a regulatory matrix of bodies, not only sustains the structures of ableism but also guides practices and discourses that extend beyond the biomedical field. The critique proposed by Crip Theory allows us to highlight how the ideals of normality and functionality are intertwined in an epistemological logic that permeates both scientific knowledge and common sense.

In this direction, it becomes necessary to deepen the understanding of science as a producer and legitimizer of meanings about disability, analyzing how technical-scientific discourse, in dialogue with common sense, contributes to the maintenance (or deconstruction) of ableist representations. Within this context, we introduce the second thematic category discussed here, focused on understanding the interfaces between science, common sense, and assistance for people with disabilities.

Science and common sense: interfaces between assistance to people with disabilities and ableism

Throughout its existence, society has used certain terms to refer to people with disabilities, such as: "people

with disabilities," "disabled," "special people," "people with special needs," "incapable," or "defective"¹⁶.

However, it is important to reflect that such expressions do not arise spontaneously; they absorb representations historically constructed by the biomedical model of disability. Clinical knowledge has produced ways of narrating and conceptualizing bodies with disabilities as unproductive, incomplete, or inefficient bodies, and these narratives have been socially naturalized as indisputable truths. Thus, it is not common sense that creates these conceptions, but rather health knowledge, which shapes how society understands and classifies these individuals.

All these expressions are loaded with stigmas and ableist ideas based on body normativity. The term "people with disabilities" is still widely used by health professionals, although the word "bearer" is not appropriate. Disability is not something a person carries temporarily, but rather an intrinsic part of their existence. Otherwise, it would be equivalent to saying that the person "bears" brown eyes or blond hair, which clearly makes no sense.

The scientific movement focused on assisting people with disabilities, expressed in the National Health Policy for People with Disabilities and the Care Network for People with Disabilities (aspects of the National Plan for the Rights of People with Disabilities – Living Without Limits), seeks to expand access and improve the quality of care for this group^{20,21}.

However, the scientific construction of disability was not based on the common sense of people with disabilities themselves, but rather on a hegemonic social common sense that interprets these bodies as needing adaptations and improvements, reinforcing ableist conceptions.

The utopian pursuit of the "perfect" body constitutes a structural barrier for all people who do not conform to socially normalized body standards. In the case of people with disabilities, their bodies are historically constructed as incapable or "pathologized," and they are systematically excluded from various social spaces. This exclusion is sustained by outdated models of understanding disability, still present in contemporary society, such as the religious and biomedical models²².

Disability continues to be medicalized and "pathologized," often interpreted as a personal tragedy or the target of welfare practices. The contemporary challenge lies in shifting the responsibility for disability from the individual to society, recognizing that limitations arise from the interaction between a person's physical or sensory condition and the social barriers that restrict their full participation²².

From a critical reading, it is observed that common sense, by framing people within idealized standards of body and functionality, ends up sustaining a scientific order that reinforces such hierarchies. As Rubem Alves points out⁸, scientific knowledge often aims to modify the individual, bringing them into conformity with established social norms.

In practical application, such as in the Care Network for People with Disabilities, science manifests itself as a specialization with in-depth technical and scientific



knowledge in prevention, early identification, and rehabilitation actions. However, such specialization does not fully guarantee the critical training of health professionals, since it is often limited to solving problems from a partial and normative perspective.

Alves⁸ warns that science, when it becomes a specialization, can be dangerous because it tends to "know more and more about less and less," reducing the overall understanding of the subject to the sum of fragmented technical parts. Thus, science can be understood, in a way, as a hypertrophy of common sense: instead of emancipating, science can reinforce pre-established patterns and limit the perception of human diversity, including the bodies and experiences of people with disabilities.

In this context, Gesser, Block, and Mello¹⁰ highlight the importance of emancipatory disability studies for the construction of anti-ableist research and practices. It is fundamental to understand disability as a form of social oppression, making it necessary to guarantee the full participation of people with disabilities by breaking down social barriers. The process of "pathologizing" and objectifying bodies with disabilities must be criticized, highlighting how science historically reproduces a normative and stereotypical view. It can be argued that the epistemological construction of ableism, at a scientific level, is not based on the common sense of people with disabilities, but rather on the hegemonic common sense of society, hindering a non-stereotypical and non-"pathologizing" view. In this sense, science should be used as a tool to promote new perspectives on ableism, favoring

innovative and critical processes in knowledge, even when conclusions about certain problems already seem consolidated⁸.

Final Considerations

Disability is often perceived as a problem of the body, preventing the individual from conforming to the standards of normality imposed by society. Ableism manifests itself daily not only through offensive terms but also through pre-established conceptions of what it means to be a person with a disability, shaped by common sense and reinforced by institutional practices. The process of "pathologizing" these bodies by science is directly reflected in healthcare, where professionals tend to direct their care towards the rehabilitation of a body considered limited, instead of considering the person's full social participation.

One limitation of this study is that it is a theoretical reflection and, therefore, does not have the support of direct empirical research with specific participants or contexts. This characteristic, while allowing for a broad and in-depth conceptual analysis, restricts the possibility of observing how discourses on body normativity and ableism manifest themselves in everyday and institutional practices.

Although the debate on ableism is gaining ground in scientific discussions, it is still little known to the public, which hinders critical reflections on its social consequences. In this context, giving voice to people with disabilities and ensuring their social participation emerges as one of the main anti-ableist strategies, promoting the deconstruction of stereotypes and the appreciation of body diversity.

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