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**ECOMOTRICITY: CONSIDERATIONS ON A CONCEPTUAL  
FRAMEWORK**

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**Eixo Temático:** Ecomotricidade

**INTRODUCING THE ISSUE:**

Experiences in nature are generally categorized in Brazil through a great deal of terminologies that are usually defined according to what motivation the experience most stalwartly brings forth: adventure, leisure, sport, risk or a mixture of these components. There is such a great number of different terminologies used that it is actually difficult to find a significant number of papers that use the same terminology or similar ones that have the same pattern of characteristics in its theoretical framework<sup>1</sup>.

One of the main reasons for this diversity of terminologies can be associated to the fact that ‘nature’ and ‘environment’ discourses are, overall, relatively new; even newer are its developments and synergies with other fields, such as sport and leisure. Epistemologically, in the environmental field and in its discursive interactions with other fields, symbols of dominance are still shaky, actors and theories are still seeking legitimation and there is a lot of room for building, even in central spaces (RODRIGUES, 2012; PAYNE; RODRIGUES, 2012). Thus, an essential movement is still in motion in these emerging discourses: finding fundamental elements upon which to build and consolidate strong theories and practices.

When we discuss terminologies we bring to the table all that is involved in the constitution of a name: essentially, language and culture, most importantly, how these corporeal phenomena potentially lead to paradigmatic shifts in its interactions with the symbolic incorporation of a new name and the experiences associated to it, possibly even

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<sup>1</sup> This affirmative is supported by the results of a Research Project currently in motion in the Federal University of Sergipe, Northeastern Brazil. Among the objectives of the project, named ‘Ecomotricity in the State of Sergipe’, is analyzing terminologies used in papers published in Brazilian journals that approach a wide range of experiences in nature.

constituting a new ‘happening’<sup>2</sup>. Inescapably, in a name there is local, regional and global history; it defines, places and speaks for the object, as well as for those associated with it – theoretically, practically and conceptually; it both reflects and constitutes motivations, meanings, perceptions; it classifies and categorizes all those that recognize and incorporate/naturalize<sup>3</sup> it, thus, legitimating it.

Accordantly, a terminology that aims to categorize experiences in nature is never merely descriptive: it embraces human-environment relations in deep and meaningful ways – What is the (local/regional/global) geo-cultural/historical construction of these relations and its contemporary meanings? Who is this person that chooses to interact in this way with his environment? Why is he doing it and why in such a way? What does he seek and what motivates him? What does it say about him or where does it place him within his society? What are his perceptions from this experience and what meanings does the experience hold to him? What does he learn from the experience, conceptually and perceptively?

Reflecting on these issues, a series of questions may be raised about how some of the more common terminologies used in Brazil to categorize experiences in nature help us better understand human-environment relations.

Adventure (more commonly used terminologies: adventure activities; adventure sports; physical adventure activities; corporeal adventure practices in nature; adventure activities in nature) – this speaks, specifically, to the meanings of adventure in different contexts: What role does adventure play, historically, in human-environment relations? How do we conceptually constitute and incorporate/naturalize different meanings of adventure (survival, fear, curiosity, leisure) and how do they influence human-environment relations (locally/regionally/globally)? Why do people seek adventure? What do they expect from an adventure experience and what are their perceptions afterwards? What can be learned from an adventure experience and how does it speak to human-environment relations and, more specifically, environmental perception/education?

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<sup>2</sup> The idea of a ‘happening’ (Foucault, 2006) rests in the emergence of new lines of thought that result in a series of occurrences (happenings) related to a common phenomenon, causing questioning and ‘instability’ in ‘naturalized’ concepts and social processes. From these occurrences new discourses and practices germinate. Therefore, new objects of knowledge arise, especially in the face of conflicts and controversies between emerging speeches and practices.

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, all meanings associated to a ‘natural’ condition speak to the concept of ‘naturalization’, as conceived by Bourdieu (2004): incorporated socially imposed classificatory systems manifested through (ignored) mental structures adjusted to social structures leading to the constitution of a *habitus*. The concept of *habitus*, according to Bourdieu (1989), is associated with relational structures in which the individual is inserted/placed constituting an open system of provisions, perceptions and actions that outlays the set of his social experiences, enabling the understanding of both the individual’s position in a field as well as his set of incorporated or materialized capitals. By understanding *habitus* as a systemic and relational structure Bourdieu intends to overcome the antinomy that traditionally exists in human science between ‘objectivism’ (preponderance of social structures over the actions of a subject) and ‘subjectivism’ (primacy of the subject’s action vis-à-vis social determinations).

Sports (more commonly used terminologies: sports in nature; adventure sports; radical sports) – directly (and inevitably) associated to the consolidated field of sports, along with all its historical paradigms, these terminologies unavoidably reflect much of these paradigms in its interactions with environmental/nature discourses, raising a series of questions: How are sports in nature the same and how are they different from traditional sports? What makes people seek sports in nature and how is it different from what makes people seek traditional sports? Considering all historical paradigms, what are the possibilities and limitations of (re)thinking/(re)building human-environment relations through sport?

Leisure in nature – similar to sports, a field with consolidated historical paradigms that come into play in synergies with environmental discourses: What role does leisure play, historically, in human-environment relations? What makes people seek leisure, overall, and leisure in nature, specifically? What do they expect from the experience and what are their perceptions afterwards? Considering all historical paradigms, what are the possibilities and limitations of (re)thinking/(re)building human-environment relations through leisure?

By saying these questions are raised I do not mean they are necessarily being asked, explicitly, by contemporary studies in Brazil. In fact, they rarely are (RODRIGUES, 2014; RODRIGUES; FREITAS, 2014). Nonetheless, understanding the subjective meanings that surround a terminology, some of these questions are (culturally/linguistically/historically) implicit to the suggested use of the presented terminologies. Overall, they are significant questions that help us understand, through specific scenarios (adventure, risk, sport, leisure), different facets of human-environment relations, including possibilities and limitations to environmental education. But all of these terminologies have clear limits to which kind of experiences they speak to and none seem to grasp the wide variety of possible experiences in nature: adventure excludes all experiences that do not meet the (subjective constituted) meanings of adventure; sport can only include experiences that meet the well conceptualized meanings of sport; leisure can only include experiences that meet the well conceptualized meanings of. In addition to creating confusing ‘frontiers’ between these categories (where one and another begins and ends), there is a whole range of experiences that are simply left out. Let’s borrow an example from Pimentel (2013, p.693):

PP and BJ are two teenage boys from Rio, residing in Morro da Formiga, slum built next to Tijuca National Park. In these woods, our heroes decide to spend the night camping, having used the afternoon for picnics and hiking in adventure trails. PP pulls out a bag of marijuana and along with BJ start making recreational consumption of that drug. While gazing at the stars and

enjoying the night singing of birds, it starts to rain, quickly forming natural downhill slides. BJ has the idea of using a piece of available wood as a board to perform a kind of downhill mud surfing. PP joins him, but without using a board, just rolling down with his body, in the process stripping his clothes and continuing buck naked. The two are spotted by park rangers and chased through the woods, having to climb leafy trees which they use as camouflage. After a few hours, they furtively return to the camping site, capturing an Armadillo on the way, which will serve as a nice meal (my translation).

How do we categorize this whole experience? Did PP and BJ engage in multiple kinds of experiences during this crazy night, or was it all part of the same experience? If we think multiple experiences, which exact characteristics can be used to conceptualize and separate one from the other? Can we objectively characterize adventure, sport and leisure, for example? If we think one wholesome experience, which characteristic(s) binds it all together?

This is where an essential characteristic can come into play: intentionality, understood as ‘corporeal-mundane and existential behavior in which the signified world is constituted and reconstituted’ (FIORI, 1986, p.4 – my translation). PP’s and BJ’s experiences were expressed, during the night, in a range of diverse corporeal manifestations. However, they were both driven to these manifestations by the same force: the intentionality of interacting with the environment. It is this element that fuels the concept of ecomotricity, built upon the idea that an experience is named and defined by subjective and meaningful human-environment interactions. In this sense, the concept of ecomotricity embraces, in more objective terms, all manifestations of human motricity driven, primordially, by the intentionality of interacting with the environment.

Having finally come around to presenting the concept of ‘ecomotricity’, along with a general contextualization of how experiences in nature are being conceptualized in Brazil, the next paragraphs will focus on conceptually framing the concept of ecomotricity. In doing so this paper aims to contribute to the wider debate of how experiences in nature are critically associated to the constitution of human-environment relations.

## **ECOMOTRICITY: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The concept of ecomotricity has as main theoretical reference the Science of Human Motricity, theory developed by the Portuguese philosopher Manuel Sérgio. In general, the theory is drawn upon the mind-body problem, questioning fragmentations between the material and symbolic worlds, as well as the legitimation of all science built upon these assumptions. In this sense, the Science of Human Motricity calls for a paradigm shift on the

line of those implicit to a ‘phenomenology of perception’ (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1996), a ‘phenomenology of the body’ (INGOLD, 2000), an ‘eco-phenomenology’ (BROWN; TOADVINE, 2003) or a “corporeal turn” (SHEETS-JOHNSTONE, 2009). Specifically, even though perception and the body itself are central to the theory, it puts motricity at the basis of human-world relations, understanding motricity as the acting body, a living body, in intentional movement to the world, to others, to transcendence, seeing that between it and everything that exists there is an indissoluble unit (SÉRGIO, 2005).

Parting from this central idea, the author proposes not only a change in nomenclature, but human motricity as a new epistemological base:

Human motricity can justify itself scientifically, from a particular theorization which takes account of *the body* and of *movement*, or better: human as a whole, in virtuality to action, on operative intentionality, as personal response to calls of transcendence. Motricity is a transcendental structure of human life, prepared for the most radical call (which requires *fundamental choice*) that guides us to change. Human motricity’s dynamism is rooted in an ontological experience of communication and desire to change. This is because human beings are corporeity and, consequently, are movement, expressiveness and presence. Women and men are movement, movement that transforms itself into gesture, a gesture that speaks and that assumes itself as an expressive, talking and creative presence. And so Motricity manifests itself...never getting tired, because it is not repetition, but creation (SÉRGIO, 1999b, p.39 – my translation).

The key element is that motricity is not the same as movement – it is the virtuality of a movement where there is intentionality, openness and relation (SÉRGIO, 1999a). Existing, as humans, is manifesting motricity at every breath, constantly creating and recreating the unique indissoluble unit that each of us calls ‘our’ world. In the words of the Brazilian poet Raul Seixas, ‘we are each a whole universe’ (1976 – my translation). A universe fundamentally built in relations – with others, with the world, with the absolute (SÉRGIO, 1995), having motricity as both propellant and evidence of this incessant dialectic: body-other, body-world, body-thing, where meaning is abundantly spilled and constantly redefined (SÉRGIO, 1996).

Understanding human-world relations through motricity means acknowledging that a human experience cannot be defined by a set of solid, unchangeable characteristics – what defines a human experience is, always, the individual’s intentional and meaningful movement (intentionality) towards that experience. To better illustrate: we can define ‘sport’ as a human corporeal practice recognized by a set of solid characteristics: competition; performance;

regulated rules, for example. Let's take beach volleyball, a current Olympic sport that gathers all of these characteristics. Now, let's say we go for a drive in a road next to the coast and see a group of people engaged in a beach volleyball match, can we safely define that human experience as sport? In an exercise of logic, yes: beach volleyball has all the characteristics of a sport; they are playing beach volleyball; therefore, that experience can be defined as sport.

But understanding that experience through motricity defies this logic: that experience may well be sport; it could also be something else; in fact, it may be sport to part of the group and something else to another part. The variable: each individual's intentionality towards the experience. In a purely materialist point of view, the group is sharing the same space, at the same time, therefore, they are all sharing the same experience. In a phenomenological point of view, each individual in that group is constantly constituting time and space upon their perception of it, associating and (re)creating meaning through their own motricity, reflecting in different intentionality towards the experience. That means the experience can be sport to one individual, if his intentionality meets the characteristics of the social constructed practice of sport, while it may be leisure to the person next to him, if that person's intentionality meets the characteristics of the social constructed practice of leisure. It may even be something in between, not quite one, nor the other. It also means that the experience may change to the same person, if in this minute his intentionality drives him in one direction and, in the next, to another. In fact, this often happens quite a lot during human experiences.

Thinking about human-world relations through motricity summons their complexity and 'messiness', in the sense it recognizes that no interaction is as clean and neat as our pre-conceived definitions would like them to be. Acknowledgement of these limits is essential to proposals that seek to better understand human experiences. Creating categories, definitions, terminologies: all of this is primordial in constructing frameworks that help us understand in which ways these experiences can possibly manifest themselves. But, considering the complexity of human motricity, that is basically how far a category, definition or terminology can go: describing possible ways, never defining a specific human experience beforehand or while it happens. In this sense, we can call upon Nagel's notorious paper, "What is it like to be a bat?" (1980) and all its repercussions in the cognitive sciences and philosophy of the mind – we can follow an individual through his whole life, studying his every move; but we will never be able to know or describe with precision how he is phenomenologically constituting that specific moment in time and space. Going back to Raul Seixas's words, we

are each too great and complex a universe, each as unique as our cosmological finger print and this uniqueness makes each particular human experience different from all others.

This all weighs in the concept of ecomotricity. Having the Science of Human Motricity as main theoretical reference, it embraces all human motricity driven, primordially, by the intentionality of interacting with the environment. Based on this one dominant characteristic, it aims to minimize the exclusion of experiences that do not meet the social constructed patterns of preconceived terminologies, such as sport, adventure, risk, radical, extreme, leisure. It also aims to avoid some of the historical paradigms ‘naturally’ associated with these terminologies.

In practical terms, ecomotricity, as a terminology, puts together a great variety of corporeal experiences that have one thing in common: individuals driven to it by the intentionality of interacting with the environment. Considering the discussions in previous paragraphs, ecomotricity can lead to a range of different corporeal manifestations: sportive, recreational, artistic, contemplative, pedagogical, vagabond<sup>4</sup>. In fact, during an experience these manifestations usually present themselves very dynamically – what started off being simply contemplative may rise into the artistic; what started off being sportive may incorporate the playfulness of recreation, or vice-versa; pedagogical may appear in an instant, maybe even sharing space with vagabonding. These nuances happen in an instant, back and forth, while the body dynamically and sensibly interacts with the environment. But while there is a greater force behind all these manifestations – the intentionality of interacting with the environment – the experience can be characterized as ecomotricity.

So, how can ecomotricity help us better understand human-environment relations? Differently from the terminologies presented in the introduction of this paper, which, in general terms, are directly associated with other terminologies or fields, such as adventure, sport and leisure, ecomotricity speaks directly to human-environment relations. The question does not circle around what drives us to adventure or ‘radical’ experiences that involve risk or the idea of risk; it does not ponder on what makes people seek sports or leisure in nature and how it is different from what makes people seek traditional sports or leisure; the question is directly oriented to what drives us, as human beings, towards experiences that allow us to interact with nature – no matter how this interaction manifests itself. The bottom line: the central question in ecomotricity is not about adventure, sports, leisure – it’s about local,

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<sup>4</sup> Environmentally designed pedagogies of reconciliation of inner-social-outer “natures”, with strong influence from slow ecopedagogies that metaphorically and figuratively represent the ecologies of somaesthetics, ethics, and ecopolitics, as they are lived creatively (PAYNE, 2014; see also RODRIGUES, 2015).

regional and global history of human-environment relations; it's about theoretical, practical and conceptual elements of human-environment relations; it's about the motivations, meanings and perceptions behind human-environment relations; it's about classifying and categorizing human-environment relations, how they may be possible, plausible, probable, limited; overall, it is, fundamentally, about human-environment relations.

## POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

Advancing in a specific field of study largely depends on the continuous search for new methodological frameworks, as well as new structures that potentially allow understanding phenomena from/through different perspectives. Often, this includes the emergence of terminologies based on theoretical structures that differ from the dominant references of the field. This leads to a dynamic 'dance' or fight between dominant and peripheral discourses, creating spaces of dispute that are crucial for the emergence, construction and continuous development of a field (Bourdieu 1989)<sup>5</sup>.

New terminologies are also essential to the potential emergence of new 'happenings' (as described by Foucault, 2006) that may lead to paradigmatic shifts or 'turns', once it embraces new sets of theories and practices that may potentially lead to alternative linguistic/cultural meanings upon that specific phenomenon.

Understanding experiences in nature through ecomotricity knocks on all these doors, but, as always, these possibilities depend on a range of factors. Establishing a strong conceptual framework is important. The next step is taking ecomotricity to the field, putting it to the test, theoretically and practically. Some initiatives have begun trailing this road: a) discussing this terminology within different research groups, including the Nucleus of Phenomenological Studies in Physical Education and the Teacher Training, Curricular Environmentalization and Science Education Research Group (both in the Federal University of São Carlos, Brazil), as well as the Education, Environment and Sustainability Faculty Research Group (Monash university, Australia), which organized an all campus seminar on the subject at Monash University in 2012; b) the creation of a Thematic Group on Ecomotricity in the Colloquium on Qualitative Research in Human Motricity, organized by the Society of Qualitative Studies in Human Movement; this year the colloquium, in its 5<sup>th</sup> edition, will happen in Valdivia, Chile; c) the creation of a curricular unit named

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<sup>5</sup> Understanding sociology as a social topology it is possible to visualize a representation of the social world in the form of a space – more specifically, a universe structured by several spaces that, despite their distinct characteristics, cannot be understood outside of a systemic and relational design. In this space, the principles of differentiation or of distribution of force/power define the 'relative position' of its individuals and groups, or agents/actors (Bourdieu 1989).

‘Ecomotricity’ in the Physical Education Program at the Federal University of São Carlos, Brazil; d) the ongoing research being done by the Research Project ‘Ecomotricity in the State of Sergipe’ at the Federal University of Sergipe, Brazil. These initiatives will not only shine a light on theoretical and practical possibilities of understanding human-environment relations through the concept of ecomotricity, but, just as importantly, it will stumble upon its limitations. Determining both will be equally important to critically analyzing the proposed conceptual framework.

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