

The Resolution of the Paradox between "Physical Discipline" and "Subject Liberation" in University Aerobics: A Reflection Based on Foucault's Philosophy of the Body

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Abstract: As an educational form integrating art and sports, university aerobics embodies both the characteristics of bodily discipline through standardized skill training and the potential for subject liberation through individual bodily expression and aesthetic freedom. This paper examines this inherent paradox using Foucault's philosophy of the body, particularly the concepts of 'disciplinary power,' 'biopolitics,' and 'self-care.' The analysis shows that standardized aerobics training is not a one-way suppression but can be transformed into a conscious bodily practice; discipline and liberation are not absolutely opposed and can achieve dialectical unity under appropriate guidance. The paper proposes a path to dissolve this paradox by shifting from coercive discipline to participatory reflexive training, providing a philosophical foundation and practical insights for university aerobics education.

Keywords: University Aerobics; Bodily Discipline; Subject Liberation; Foucault; Philosophy of the Body; Paradox Dissolution

DOI:10.12417/3029-2328.26.04.005

1. Introduction

College aerobics is a physical education program centered on bodily movements, grounded in musical rhythm, and aimed at aesthetic expression. It requires students to master precise movement techniques, synchronized formation transitions, and compelling expressive qualities. On the surface, this training exhibits clear characteristics of standardization and discipline: instructor demonstrations, student imitation, repeated practice, and standardized assessments. This approach readily evokes Foucault's description of bodily shaping and control within a "trained society." However, aerobics also serves functions of stress relief, individual expression, and confidence enhancement, allowing students to experience bodily freedom and pleasure through choreography and performance. This creates a seemingly contradictory tension: Does aerobics ultimately discipline students' bodies, liberate their subjectivity, or can both coexist?

Foucault's philosophy of the body provides a powerful analytical tool. He revealed how power in modern society produces a "tamed body" through disciplinary techniques, while in his later years he emphasized that individuals can achieve autonomous subjectivation through "self-techniques." This paper adopts this theoretical framework to systematically examine the manifestations of discipline and liberation in college aerobics and their intrinsic relationship, arguing that the paradox between the two is not insurmountable. The key lies in reinterpreting the relationship between the body, power, and liberation, transforming external norms into internal consciousness, and thereby facilitating the transition from a "disciplined body" to an "autonomous aesthetic body."

2. Core Concepts of Foucault's Philosophy of the Body

(1) Discipline Power and the Plasticity of the Body In *Discipline and Punishment*, Foucault argues that power in modern society is no longer characterized by monarchical violence but rather by a refined, continuous, and efficient discipline power. Through hierarchical surveillance, standardized adjudication, and inspection, this power spatially and temporally arranges individuals' bodies, decomposes their movements, and corrects their postures, thereby producing "useful bodies" that are both capable and compliant. Schools, barracks, factories, and hospitals are all typical sites of discipline. Consequently, the body becomes the central object of power and exhibits high plasticity. Discipline is not merely repressive; it is productive—it cultivates bodily capacities and behavioral habits that conform to social order.

(2) Biopolitics and Population Management Biopolitics operates concurrently with disciplinary power, focusing on overarching life indicators such as population health, lifespan, and birth rates. Physical education can be regarded as part of biopolitics: the state shapes healthy and robust national physiques through school sports programs. The promotion of college aerobics also serves broader objectives, including enhancing students' physical fitness, improving posture, and fostering a spirit of collectivism. Consequently, aerobics is not merely an individual activity but a socialized and institutionalized practice of bodily management.

(3) Self-Technology and Subjective Liberation Foucault's late turn toward ancient Greek-Roman ethics introduced the concept of "self-technology" —the process by which individuals, through their own efforts, transform their bodies, souls, thoughts, and behaviors to attain a state of truth, happiness, or purity. He emphasized that even in highly disciplined societies, individuals retain space for free practice, manifested through the aesthetic shaping of the self. This aligns closely with the intrinsic logic of aerobics: students can actively choose how to execute movements, interpret beauty, and perceive the body as material for self-creation. Thus, discipline and liberation are not mutually exclusive but can be integrated within the framework of "self-governance."

3.The Phenomenon of Physical Discipline in University Aerobics

(1) Standardized Movements and Refined Evaluation University aerobics instruction adheres to clear movement specifications: the height and angle of arms, the length and rhythm of steps, and body posture and orientation are all meticulously defined. Teachers, acting as agents of disciplinary authority, enforce standardized evaluations through demonstrations, corrections, and scoring. Students practice repeatedly, striving for perfect execution. This approach resembles Foucault's concept of "drill" —a technique that tames the body through repetitive movements. The assessment criteria for aerobics (movement accuracy, power, and coordination) further reinforce the disciplinary effect, enabling students to gradually adapt to and internalize these standards.

(2) Temporal-Spatial Segmentation and Collective Discipline: Aerobics classes are typically held at fixed times and venues, with students lining up in formations and executing movements according to unified commands or music. Foucault argues that discipline first manifests as meticulous control over space and time: each individual occupies a designated position, and every movement follows a prescribed tempo. In university aerobics classes, instructors regulate the rhythm— "Ready, 5, 6, 7, 8" —with students' physical responses synchronized precisely to the beat. Collective practice also reinforces mutual monitoring: misaligned movements are visible, compelling individuals to strive for conformity with collective standards. This temporal-spatial discipline shapes a unified bodily landscape.

(3) Body Image and Self-Discipline: The more subtle form of discipline stems from students' internal self-examination. Influenced by social media and aesthetic culture, college students—particularly female students—often view aerobics as a means to achieve a slender, well-proportioned, and powerful physique. They actively pursue aesthetically pleasing movements and perfect postures, even practicing on their own after class. Foucault noted that the most effective state of discipline occurs when the disciplined individual monitors themselves. This self-discipline is pervasive in university aerobics: to achieve better results or a more attractive appearance, students voluntarily accept and even reinforce these norms. Consequently, disciplinary authority no longer derives solely from external instructors but becomes a conscious pursuit by the body itself.

4.The Potential for Subject Liberation: The Dimension of Freedom in Aerobics

(I) Body Perception and Autonomous Expression Although aerobics operates within a standardized framework, it differs from purely mechanical training. It demands that movements possess rhythmic quality, emotional expressiveness, and personal style. The same eight-beat movement can be performed with varying intensity, range, and expression by different students. Foucault argued that the body is not only an object of power but also a site for subjective perception and expression. Through repeated practice in aerobics, students gradually develop refined control over various body parts, which in turn serves as a medium for expressing inner feelings. When students

"dance" with intention rather than merely "perform" movements, the body transforms from a passive instrument into an active subject of expression.

(2) Creativity and Impromptu Elements: At advanced levels of aerobics instruction, students are often encouraged to choreograph their own routines or complete creative assignments. At this stage, students are no longer passive recipients of standardized routines but actively reinterpret them. They can select preferred music, design personalized movement transitions, and modify formation changes. This aligns with Foucault's concept of "using disciplinary mechanisms as a strategy against discipline" —that is, seeking freedom within the gaps of power. The optional routine segment in aerobics competitions similarly demonstrates subjectivity: while adhering to basic rules, teams can showcase unique creativity. Such creativity liberates the body from mere "standardized replication" and advances toward "aesthetic construction."

(3) Self-Care and the Aesthetics of Life In his later years, Foucault proposed that individuals can treat their bodies and lives as works of art to be shaped. University aerobics serves as the ideal vehicle for realizing this "aesthetics of life." Through long-term exercise, students not only enhance their health and physical fitness but also cultivate an attentive, caring, and aesthetically conscious attitude toward their bodies. They learn to listen to their body's signals (fatigue, excitement, relaxation) and master the selection of appropriate exercise intensity and styles. This practice transcends utilitarian performance goals, embodying what Foucault termed "self-care" —an ethical practice of actively shaping one's own subjectivity. In this sense, aerobics is not a prison of discipline but a laboratory for self-liberation.

5.Resolving the Paradox: From Opposition to Dialectical Unity

(1) Reinterpreting the Relationship Between Discipline and Liberation It is commonly believed that discipline and liberation are two opposing concepts: discipline suppresses subjectivity, while liberation eliminates discipline. However, Foucault's insight lies in recognizing that any practice of freedom inevitably exists within certain power relations. Absolute, norm-free freedom does not exist. Therefore, the first step in resolving the paradox is to abandon the binary oppositional mindset and acknowledge the necessity of norms in aerobics. The key question is whether norms serve as oppressive tools or constructive means. If norms are open, negotiable, and serve students' own goals, then discipline ceases to be a force of alienation and becomes a condition for the subject's growth.

(2) Teaching strategies for transitioning from mandatory discipline to participatory, self-regulatory training include: First, granting students the right to interpret the guidelines. Teachers should explain the rationale behind each movement (e.g., joint protection, optimized mechanical transmission) rather than simply ordering "this must be done." Understanding the rationale behind the guidelines encourages students to shift from passive compliance to active adherence. Second, introducing reflective practice. Students are required to maintain regular exercise logs documenting their movement sensations, self-evaluations, and areas for improvement, thereby developing awareness and critical reflection on their physical state. Third, expanding choice options. Students are permitted to select difficulty levels, music styles, or peer partnerships within a defined range. These approaches transform external discipline into "self-regulatory training" —where students not only accept the guidelines but also continuously reflect on, adjust to, and surpass them.

(3) Cultivating an Aesthetic Body Consciousness Foucault advocates treating the body as an object of aesthetic practice. University aerobics should reduce the absolute emphasis on competitive performance and quantitative assessments while strengthening the aesthetic dimension. Instructors can guide students to focus on the fluidity of movements, rhythmic coherence, and natural emotional expression, rather than merely pursuing precise angles. Assessment methods may incorporate self-evaluation, peer evaluation, and creative presentations. As students gradually perceive aerobics as an artistic expression and a means of self-cultivation, discipline ceases to be an oppressive constraint and becomes the "fundamental skill" essential for freer bodily expression. Just as pianists require scale practice to play free melodies, aerobics practitioners need standardized movements to achieve creative

freedom. At this point, discipline and liberation achieve unity: discipline serves as the means of liberation, while liberation constitutes the ultimate goal of discipline.

(4) The Reconstruction of the Teacher's Role: From Supervisor to Companionship Partner. In the traditional model, teachers serve as the primary enforcers of disciplinary authority. To resolve this paradox, teachers should transform into "companion guides." They no longer threaten students with harsh punishments but instead stimulate students' intrinsic motivation through demonstration, encouragement, and dialogue. Foucault argues that power relations cannot be eliminated, but they can be made dynamic, reversible, and less oppressive. Teachers can regularly discuss training-related confusions with students, share their understanding of beauty, and even have students take turns leading warm-ups or creating activities. This flow of power helps break the one-way disciplinary relationship, fostering a shared experiential space for mutual learning.

6. Conclusion

University aerobics indeed embodies the mechanisms of bodily discipline described by Foucault: standardized movements, temporal-spatial discipline, and self-discipline. Yet it simultaneously holds profound potential for subject liberation—through bodily perception, creative expression, and self-care. These two aspects are not irreconcilable paradoxes. From the perspective of Foucault's philosophy of the body, discipline and liberation can achieve dialectical unity within appropriate practical frameworks. The key to resolving this paradox lies not in abolishing norms, but in transforming externally imposed disciplinary measures into participatory, reflective, and aesthetically engaged self-training. Instructors should redefine their roles to cultivate students' bodily awareness and autonomy. Only then can university aerobics truly serve as an educational practice that fosters both physical health and the development of free individuals. Future research could explore specific variations across different university types and gender groups during this transformation process, with corresponding teaching experiments for validation. Nevertheless, the speculative conclusions presented in this paper provide a solid philosophical foundation for practical implementation.

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