

## Grammars of ableism: dialogues in the folds between disability, gender, childhood, and adolescence

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**Abstract** *In this theoretical essay, we assume ableism as a grammar that sustains several duplicities that hierarchize and discriminate reputed dissident corporalities. We maintain this argument based on the violation of rights to health and life of disabled people, travestis, trans and intersex people, and children and adolescents, in practices of surveillance and correction, which sustain health and education institutions, and Language as the central point of such enabling.*

**Keywords** *Social discrimination, Gender, Health of the Disabled Person, Children, Teenager*

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## Introduction: grammars and 'situated standpoints'

This essay draws inspiration from Honneth's notion of grammar<sup>1</sup>, for whom the word *recognition* is essential. According to the author, struggles for recognition are not to be confused with empowerment. In doing so, he distances himself from certain ideals of ability and productivity that today constitute the *ethos* of the neoliberal subject, based on the conception of a person who inhabits a body-property, according to contemporary legal models on the status of the body.

The grammars of recognition return us to otherness and reciprocity: recognizing the other so that one can recognize oneself<sup>2</sup>. And, in this case, there is no way to take the place of the other, either to speak for her/him/them, or to produce a movement that seems "generous": to offer them "a voice". The voice of those who are subordinated tends to be silenced, representing a moral operation of subtraction of legitimate and epistemic authority over their existence.

To *recognize*, in the dynamics of social interaction, means assuming the conflicts<sup>2</sup>. Mediators of form and content operate in interactions, and the elements of content enable the rescue of affections, idiosyncrasies, of the characteristics that make us unique (specificity) and, at the same time, collective (generality). The form, on the other hand, allows us to share the recognition of the rights of each person and is at the foundation of the bond generated in social interactions.

According to Honneth<sup>1</sup>, the Law is an essential mechanism for social recognition. Recognizing the legal person, we produce communicability, respect, bond, and reciprocity. As a struggle, recognition presupposes the existence and appreciation of moral subjects, in fact and in law. However, only recognizing the legal entity is not enough. The political construction of the body, in contemporary legal discourses, is often separated from the person<sup>3</sup> and bodily experiences. Therefore, its foundations are supported by rationalities that commodify and standardize the body and make it property, in a movement that erases possibilities of political subjects and other singular and diverse corporeities.

We resume Foucault<sup>4</sup> in the criticism of the sovereign, universal subject. The subject is constructed in real games, where norms, disciplines, and historical practices of subjection operate with the ambition of telling truths, normalizing acts, behaviors, customs, and desires. For the author, it is in the political dimension of subjectification

processes, as practices of resistance against the established knowledge-power, that new modes of existence are produced, referring to other sensitive experiences, to singularities, all anchored in an ethical, political, and aesthetic exercise.

We seek theoretical, political, ethical, and moral approaches that focus on the embodied experience, the body in the world and in interrelation and interdependence with other bodies. We interrogate the multiple and reticular discourses of subjection that operate on bodies interpreted as "without authority" of speech: children; adolescents; disabled people; and *travestis*, intersex people, and trans people. Based on the authors' experiences, we explore other senses of recognition of multiple corporeities. Subject of rights are those who inhabit a unique body, composed of singular characteristics that do not mischaracterize their humanity, on the contrary, they affirm their multiplicity of being and existing in the world.

This article presents itself an essay, in the self-critical reflexivity and the freedom of those who write it, renouncing certainties and evidence<sup>5</sup>. This perspective reverberates in the plurality of voices and 'situated standpoints', in the way themes are launched, approached, and linked, in the way experiences are valued and become raw material in their making. This construction allows us to speak in the first person plural and blur certain rationalities in the theoretical production of public health, by presenting fragments of thoughts and reflections "without necessarily presenting a complete system of thought"<sup>5</sup>(p.44).

We share a chain of ideas that go through strangenesses and deviations<sup>5</sup>, where the discussion on ableism assumes the interpretation of *structure*. That is, it operates as a logic, a grammar of uses and meanings that, in the body normative key, disqualifies disabled people and also *travestis*, intersex people, trans people, children, and adolescents. The latter two, diminished by adultcentrism, are subordinated within the structure of patriarchy, where the model of man, adult, white, straight, predominates, also making women and other sexual orientation and gender identities invisible.

Ableism as a transversal grammar to other forms of discrimination allows us to dialogue with the concept of intersectionality, as assumed by Akotirene<sup>6</sup>: a category created by Black feminists to situate their bodies in intersecting identity avenues of race, class, and gender oppressions, which more recently has come to include other

social markers, such as disability. In this text, intersectionality is addressed as a relevant analytical key of ableist grammars and, thus, helps us to improve critical thinking within public health. We emphasize that when these intersections meet intersex children or disabled children, their effects are exponential.

To pursue this argument, situated as organic intellectuals and networked agents, we anchor our experiences in the reflexivity of militant, academic, and professional practices in the fields of health, anthropology, and education. We are guided by the right to have rights, which permeates the recognition of dialogue with reciprocity and otherness, seeking to explain the ableist logic that operates by subordinating the bodies of children, disabled people, trans and intersex people.

Therefore, we assume the discomfort with gender grammars in the singular and plural inflections of pronouns, nouns, and adjectives, which, from the beginning of this text, appear first in the feminine, followed by other representations separated by slash. This choice breaks with a representation that generalizes<sup>7</sup> a male reference. Ableism, here reread as grammar, implies that gender grammars must be reviewed in their inflections, causing displacements in the experiences of visual and sound readings of texts, in the aesthetic, political, and ethical dimensions of each body. We must bend grammar so that it contemplates the singularities that constitute us.

### **Ableist logic and intersectional metamorphoses**

We highlight two ways of interpreting ableism. First, in the sense of “discrimination” against disabled people, that is, “when a person does not see with their eyes, does not hear with their ears, and does not walk like a biped, they are read as ‘deficient’ and starts to be culturally perceived as ‘incapable’”<sup>8</sup>(p.101). Second, as a “structure” of oppression marked by the imperative of the device of “compulsory able-bodiedness”, which naturalizes and hierarchizes capacities by the shape, appearance, and functioning of bodies for what is normal, healthy, beautiful, productive, useful, independent, and able. In line with Campbell<sup>10</sup>, we conceive ableism as “a bodily and behavioral normativity based on the premise of a total functionality of the individual”<sup>8</sup>(p.101), in which the natural is to have a body without disabilities, diseases, or any other apparent “defects”.

This reading causes other corporalities besides disability to be read as unintelligible or

atypical, in a hierarchy of bodies where, in the framework of gradations, the atypical bodies of disabled people are at the top of the ableist structure<sup>8,10</sup>. This shows the accuracy of the analogy of ableism being for disabled people what racism is for Black and Indigenous people, adultcentrism for children and adolescents, sexism for women, and transphobia for trans and intersex people.

Furthermore, if in the ableist logic other social groups can be discursively read as “less able”, then ableism as a structuring logic of oppression also operates intersectionally<sup>7</sup>, doubling the duality able/disabled in other operations of moral grammars: in racism (which hierarchizes white, black, and indigenous people), in sexism (which hierarchizes men and women), in LGBTphobic behaviors (homosexual *versus* heterosexual; transgender *versus* cisgender; and intersex *versus* endosex), and in adultcentrism (which hierarchizes adults *versus* children and adolescents, subjecting the latter to the former).

Thus, the ableist logic not only invites the hierarchy between bodies, subjects, and differences, but also implies the perception that all binary thinking is itself ableist, since it presupposes bodies and subjects ontologically “missing” in relation to other hegemonic ones. Therefore, racism, sexism, LGBTphobia, and adultcentrism are systems of oppression crossed by ableism.

Another author, Davis<sup>11</sup> argues that, due to the fact of the disabled body being “a much more transgressive and deviant figure”(p.5), the silence of the Social and Human Sciences – we add the Health Sciences – and of the progressive “Left” movements regarding the absence of disability as an analytical category in the studies and struggles involved with the issues of the body and the social construction of gender, race, sexuality, and class, for example, does not make sense. This exclusion operates as an analyzer that reveals the refusal to recognize disability as legitimate, and seeks to move away from the eugenic and biomedical matrix of disability as pathology<sup>12,13</sup>. In addressing her criticism of the LGBTQIA+ movement, Ávila<sup>13</sup> values the inclusion of ableism as a matrix of intersectional discrimination in feminist, decolonial, and queer theories and practices. She makes this in order to confront “horizontal hostility”, a discursive practice that reduces “some emancipatory projects as being less urgent than others, thus making unfeasible the political potential to interrupt the proliferation of fields of oppression by separating them from each other”<sup>13</sup>(p.141).

Assuming the importance of disability as a category of epidemiological analysis, for exam-

ple, can strengthen public health in overcoming the systems of oppression sustained by neoliberal capitalism, closely imbricated in the body normativity of our social structure. The one in which patriarchy, whiteness, and “cisheteronormativity” are also structuring and are structurally implicated in each other.

In the next sections, we will address the intersections of ableism with gender and childhood, also demarcating its place as a concept that folds within the “categories of articulation”, in Piscielli’s<sup>14</sup> terms. That is, this is not only about the relationship between “disability and gender”, or between “disability and childhood”, but about the difference in their broad meaning, in the sense of thinking of each fold as a “unit formed by this articulation, [which] is a complex structure that relates them by their differences and similarities”<sup>14</sup>(p.268). With this analytical proposal, we will not address the fold regarding race, considering the limits of the place of authorship, recognizing the power of this discussion in the intersections with disability, gender, sexual orientation, and generation.

### **The ableist grammar in intersex corporeities**

Secular and traditional rationality operates on disparate and binary analytical keys, and justifies compulsory cisheteronormative practices<sup>15,16</sup>. These operate on the bodies of *travestis*, trans people, and intersex people, which are fused, first, by the dynamics little described in normative textbooks. Every body that, emulated by the binomial sex/gender<sup>17</sup>, escape these classifications, is understood as cisgenderity or cisheteronormativity. This supports a critique of public policies that, based on this rationality, exclude *travestis*, trans, and intersex subjects in the diversity of their bodies in being and existing in the world.

Foucault<sup>18</sup> allows important analyses by evoking the case of Herculine Barbin and their diary, analyzing the corrective medicalization of their intersex body. Researchers in the field of gender and sexualities, such as Mauro Cabral, Amiel Vieira, Thais Emilia – among other activists (re) united around this debate of the legitimacy of the intersex body –, began to dispute its recognition in the transnational political scenario, as Honneth inspires us<sup>1</sup>. These corroborated little or nothing with the medical argument that, already present in the Foucaultian analysis, is still present in 2020, repeatedly, in the surgical practice

of genital adequacy before the intersex body. In this operation of correction of intersex bodies lies one of the folds of ableist logic, which authorizes some bodies as more legitimate than others and which ruins the possibility of recognition as the basis for future processes of engagement in groups, of construction of self-respect, self-realization, and self-esteem.

By adapting the intersex body to a binary rationality, it compulsorily assumes a transgenderism imposed by cisgenderism. Thus, the body that operates within other perspectives is triggered by ableist grammars to gain fluency in the mandatory binary *cis/system*. Indeed, the intersex body that could or could not have a reading within the binary, is compulsorily placed in a world not thought for it.

In research that mixes autoethnographic reports and life stories, these subjects imprint their marks on the human experience that, in our view, reverberate a criticism of the ableist aspects present in corrective medical practices, based on standards considered aesthetically acceptable. Such divergent bodies and subjects are repeatedly deprived of public policies that serve them<sup>16</sup>, and therefore of their right to public life.

The COVID-19 pandemic mobilized the expansion of this debate at the national level, by activities carried out in a virtual environment. In this history of the present time, several *lives* were produced by central actors of this discussion and a unison voice echoed in all of them: the end of the medical practice of compulsory adaptation of intersex bodies in newborns<sup>19</sup>.

The inadequacies of these corrective clinical practices, operating in a binary ableist grammar, are associated with another knowledge-power of binary discipline concretized in the language. As an insufficient gender technology, language does not contemplate intersex bodies. Linguistic and grammatical attributes do not contemplate their specificities, so in this essay, the exercise of writing and promoting a non-binary reading in pronouns and their inflections in Portuguese is intentional. For cisgender or transgender men, we use specific articles to body, gender, sex, or “gender expression”. For *travestis*, cisgender or transgender women, the use of articles is adhered to in the same way: she, her. Intersex subjects must have some property of the language that best suits them. As suggested by some researchers, theorists, and actors/actresses of the social scene, one must rely on non-binary aspects that corroborate some citizenship<sup>20</sup> to these individuals. Citizenship is a category addressed by França<sup>20</sup>,

concerned with the founding condition of the subjects to fight for public policies and guarantees.

At this moment it is worth turning to the memory and experience of one of the authors, who, when teaching two intersex students in a public school in the interior of the state of Rio de Janeiro<sup>21</sup>, could testify to the lack of understanding of them by the binary sexist aspects adopted by the school. With a personal commitment to confront this discriminatory, non-inclusive, and ableist logic, she recalls having included in her classes questions that suggested a greater number of records related to sexual and gender diversity. This meant, for example, that in one of the elementary school tests (6th to 9th grade), the parts of the human body in the English language (subject being taught), began to have three options for the genital part, respectively, penis, vagina, and intersex.

This variation was easily and quickly understood by most students. In younger students, up to 12 years old, there was rapid assimilation of the content; in older students, from 13 to 16 years old, the topic was received jokingly. Concerning the families, there was only a couple who sought the school, asking for a detailed explanation of that content addressed to a universe of 400 students.

This memorialized experience serves as a bet on escape routes for bodies that emerge, survive, and resist. This is because we must remember that everything is production, above all, of meanings. The *crip* body – understood as affirming disability as a personal characteristic – deserves to be evoked for claiming the legitimacy of a body that escapes binarisms from an anti-ableist thought. It helps us to realize that, although orthodox writing practices are revisited by great theorists, one must question the requirement of adequacy of the one who cannot deliver what a whole society urges.

We rely on the term *diverCIS*ty as a diversity that is elaborated as an accepted pillar that does not support all bodies and subjects. According to Brah<sup>22</sup>, the term opens up as an inclusive aesthetic that projects itself as a contingent issue, operating on difference by transforming it from inequality, exploitation, and oppression into a legitimate expression of equality, diversity, and democratic forms of agency.

It is still worth resuming the memorialized experience under the effects of the body normativity of a view interpreted as “wrong or out of place”. A scene remembered as an analyzer of

these movements is highlighted by York<sup>16</sup> when her monocular visual impairment was the subject of ridicule, named as one-eyed. In her childhood, her body denounced this cripple, the *crip* context, subjecting her disability to a body normative judgment.

Immersed in the ableism of *diverCIS*ties, the body that tensions multiple grammars needs to be “fit”, otherwise the price of the politics of these grammars, always hegemonic, will act prescriptively to remove it from the scene. When we think from various perspectives and analytical keys, more than triggering normative and exclusionary aspects, the sense of the possible is presented to each body that is unauthorized, not legitimized, and not representable to society.

### **The ableist grammar in the folds with the adultcentric logic**

We do not have the child and childhood as universal. Thus, as we addressed denaturalizations of body and gender in the previous sections, we speak of social constructions, which does not mean that concrete subjects with their needs cease to exist. We emphasize that children and adolescents who are intersex and have disabilities are legitimate in their existence. To be guided by the idea of social construction is to recognize the historicity and political potential of life. It is to understand that children are several, childhoods are multiple, and that expectations, values, and investments fall on concrete subjects. Debates are staged, as well as standpoint speeches, absences, and erasures. From this, their most basic needs become demands that are socially and culturally constructed. We are fed by the humanities in this construction, which intends to make public health think.

In the case of children, the grammar sensitizes the imaginary of protection, but an imaginary that relegates them to the condition of being smaller, almost a non-subject. This protection is an essential mechanism for children to build their *self* from the relationship with themselves and with other references. As essential care, it is part of the so-called *sociation* processes<sup>2</sup> that put the child in touch with norms for action and with the expectations of others. Thus, they share and take part in regulated social interactions. In this process, three construction movements based on intersubjectivity and interdependence operate: “self-respect”, “self-esteem”, and “self-realization”.

If in social interactions the dimensions of reciprocity fail in the recognition of the other

as a subject of rights, what is called self-esteem will fail. That is, if in Honneth<sup>1</sup> the radical “self” stands out, this self must not be interpreted as individualistic isolation, but as a self that is built on intersubjectivity, in the game of relationships. That is, it is necessary to internalize multiple references in the intersubjective game.

“*Self-realization*” relates to the awareness that the others exist and are different from me, therefore, recognition lies in them. In addition, “self-realization” triggers the awareness that we are unique beings, and turns into “*self-respect*”. Honneth<sup>1</sup> associates society with the field of intersubjectivity and autonomy as a possibility of positive dependence. According to the author, the individual is linked to a network of intersubjective relationships and, thus, is structurally dependent on other individuals.

The right to have rights involves reflection on actions that compromise the dimensions of “self-respect”, “self-esteem”, and “self-realization” as constituents of autonomy. This is identified with the concept of interdependence, which does not cease to refer us to the bases of support. Autonomy, therefore, is not to be confused with independence. It triggers the management of networks and bonds that will be recognized in the interaction with self-respect, considering the other as holder of rights. It gains the sense of managing one’s dependencies, based on what reaffirms everyone as interdependent. As Butler reminds us, “Nuestras leyes y normas sociales se basan en ese modelo en el que somos seres individuales y adultos que no dependen unos de otros y nunca lo han hecho”<sup>23</sup>. Independence is a fiction and should not be confused with autonomy, which refers to bonds, management of dependencies and interdependencies, and associations in networks.

The sphere of social appreciation is linked to the ability of a subject recognizing the other as a valuable being. If social groups want to have participation and social esteem, they must leave their private sphere so that their activities are recognized externally. In the perspective of recognizing the rights of children, we turn to Alenen<sup>24</sup>. The author, supported by feminist studies of childhood, defends the need to confront and deconstruct the adultcentric perspective. This implies moving towards a participatory and emancipatory perspective, an antidote to deconstructing an epistemological posture that reduces and subjugates children and adolescents to a smaller, less legitimate, subjugated place, of someone to be watched or corrected. Based on

this idea, we suggest that the ableist logic can bend in different ways in the case of children and adolescents, among which we highlight two: 1) by the non-recognition of their forms of expression and existence that challenge the ideals of typical development; 2) by the non-recognition – on the part of their reference adults – that they are subject to an experience that takes place in their body.

If we talk about children in the plural, then this plurality should rhyme with the diversity of race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, age group, disability, class, and complex and rare health conditions. In this direction, Goodley et al.<sup>25</sup> point out the need to situate concepts that would organize human existence, such as development, family, and sexuality, supporting the dialogue between disabled children and young people in the grammars of abuse, neglect, and marginalization. Thus, they also explore the association between the body of the disabled person and the monstrosity. In this case, to live with a severe cognitive disability, for example, is to be kidnapped from the category of human, for not being inscribed in the grammars of ability, of an expected model of body and development. At the base of this model that dehumanizes disabled children and adolescents, the ideals of “normality”, “normal state”, and “body normativity” are situated.

By rescuing the grammars of ableism, we also recognize the criticism to the adultcentric perspective, for it is a conduct that judges children and adolescents as beings to be watched, controlled, and corrected, and which is the foundation of a certain way of producing health and education based on a coming-to-be, in a development based on reference patterns of behaviors and moralities. Therefore, we believe that a decolonial feminist perspective that politicizes disability is necessary for us to become “bodies in alliance”<sup>26</sup>, transgressing all the boundaries of the body normative cis/systems, incorporating and valuing the different possibilities of inhabiting atypical bodies.

Supported by authors who discuss theories of corporal Justice, Ortega<sup>27</sup>(p.229) shows how an “instrumental understanding of corporeity” guides contemporary legal discourses that express notions of the body, which classify citizens who escape these norms as inferior. The author relies on the concept of *dis-citizenship* to demarcate the unequal citizenship that is produced in these relationships. Disabled people, trans and intersex people, as well as children and adoles-

cents and other social groups, experience this inferior citizenship on a daily basis, the result of an ableist logic guided by a reading of an integrally functional and productive body that these subjects could not truly achieve.

Discourses that corroborate the inferiority of childhood in social relationships can be perceived in different contexts. One of the most striking is the idea of infantilization, present in moral and critical discourses on disability and aging, for example. The ableist logic is also operated when movements of disabled people or elderly people demand a non-infantilized treatment, respecting the subjects in their autonomy for decision-making. In this discursive example, childhood is taken as a locus of inferiority, of diminished or non-existent listening, a place of non-recognition, of invisibility. The recognition of the adult is claimed, that is, the recognition of an other worthy of respect, an other who is not a child. In the case of the gestational period, the logic of productivity and the ideals of capability pass through childhood in different ways. There are several fetal monitoring technologies that are constituted as subjectivity producing devices, building the normality references expected by families and society. What escapes the standard is often received as unexpected, undesirable, tragic.

When it comes to disabled children, developmental patterns are expected for each case; however, devices of this nature are exposed from time to time. A recent example lies in the life experience of children born with congenital Zika Virus syndrome, whose existences have created their own models of development still unknown to specialists. In the face of such ignorance, one of the first expressions of the ableist logic emerged in the discourses that questioned the continuity of such existences marked by such singular characteristics, calling into question, once again, the capability for life that escapes the bodily standards recognized today.

Expectations around children's sexuality also make up social relationships from gestation, when gender references are assigned to them even before birth. Clothes, accessories, toys, and even colors are designed to produce distinctions that are based on the female-male binary, generating deep tensions when not matched in the course of the child's development. Such conflicts cross the field of health from an early age, since one of the agendas around gender diversity is care based on hormonal therapies for children, an issue still treated with controversy in various sectors of Brazilian society.

For different reasons, body diversity, around gender, complex chronic illness, or disability, make up childhoods and organize the relationships of children and adolescents in and with the world. Nevertheless, the recognition of this singularity from explicit discourses in normative devices is recent. The Statute of Children and Adolescents (ECA), despite mentioning freedom of religion and belief, non-discrimination on grounds of disability, color and race, health condition, and family situation, among others, does not recognize gender as a structuring category of social relations<sup>28</sup>. In the Brazilian Law of Inclusion (LBI), children are considered especially vulnerable. The latter, regarding health, is the first Brazilian legislation on the subject to highlight the "respect for the specificity, gender identity, and sexual orientation of the person with disabilities"<sup>29</sup>(Art. 18, p. 4, VI).

These and other provisions inspired, in 2018, the drafting of Joint Resolution No. 1, between the National Council for the Rights of Children and Adolescents (CONANDA) and the National Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CONADE). This document dealt especially with the care of children and adolescents with disabilities in the System of Guarantee of Rights (SGD) and presented important guidelines, among which stand out the care with other audiences and without segregation, the free exercise of their sexual and reproductive rights, respect for their sexual orientation and gender identity, in addition to the non-differentiated treatment of their age group<sup>30</sup>.

Such guidelines contribute to the formulation of public policies, lines of care, and attention willing to face the ableist logic that constitutes social relationships, with the possibility of stimulating other perceptions about the category childhood and the multiplicity of ways of being a child. The barriers produced and reproduced by these discriminatory practices focusing on the body demand reflections strong enough to subvert normalizing ideas of corporeity, capability, and autonomy. *Disability Studies* have been presented as an important theoretical tool in this direction.

Under the catchphrase "I am my body", we bet that this essay implies the need to shift the understanding of the epistemological subject to the embodied subject, producing and valuing standpoint speeches from localized and partial knowledge<sup>28</sup>, with their life stories and embodied experiences. The situated standpoint starts from the position and relational situation of those who authorize themselves with mastery, also using

the body as a set of lived meanings that follow in the direction of their own balance. In the case of disabled women, they have often been ignored and/or discredited as subjects by feminism, in the name of a homogenization of the category 'woman,' also contributing to the erasure of the dimension of the disability experience and its intersections with sexuality, race/ethnicity, and class. This reasoning is not different from the one presented in this essay, with the experiences of children and intersex people.

### **Final considerations**

When we write about the grammars of ableism, our intention is also to "occupy the disability" with the plurality of our positions and places of contestation, showing how disability emerges as

a category of analysis by always being in relationships with other social markers of difference, such as gender and childhood presented in this essay.

By expanding the discussion about ableism beyond a logic restricted to the evaluation and discrimination of the disabled body, we also recognize the need to expand this discussion to include other matrices of oppression, especially racism, a gap already recognized and justified in this essay.

We assume the ableist logic as a grammar that organizes a set of rationalities in a disciplinary, dispersed, and effective way. These operate in the institution of authorities based on the ideology of compulsory able-bodiedness, in language, and in a morality that is assumed in the practices and knowledge that correct or defend the correction of disabled bodies and intersex bodies.

## Collaborations

MCN Moreira worked on argument design, writing, review. FS Dias worked on argument collaboration, writing, review. AG Mello worked on argument collaboration, writing, review. SW York worked on argument collaboration, writing, review.

## Acknowledgments

We thank the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq), the Fundação Carlos Chagas de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ), and the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES) for their support to the authors.

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Article submitted 12/05/2022

Approved 13/05/2022

Final version submitted 15/05/2022

Chief editors: Romeu Gomes, Antônio Augusto Moura da Silva