

THE URGENCY OF “CRITICAL PHYSIOTHERAPY” IN PORTUGAL: CONCEPT AND PERSPECTIVES

A urgência da “fisioterapia crítica” em Portugal: conceito e perspetivas

La urgencia de la “fisioterapia crítica” en Portugal: concepto y perspectivas

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ABSTRACT

Background: the concept of “critical physiotherapy” has become established globally as an essential movement that challenges the historical assumptions and biomedical paradigms of the profession. **Objective:** this theoretical essay aims to substantiate the use of the term “fisioterapia crítica” and explore its origins, its fundamental principles (based on social theory and philosophy), and analyse its impact on practice, education and research, emphasising the urgency of its adoption in Portugal. **Methodology:** this study consists of a reflective theoretical essay of a narrative nature, based on the seminal literature of the Critical Physiotherapy Network’s advanced thinking movement to substantiate the arguments and perspectives presented. **Results:** analysis of the literature and the Portuguese context reveals that the national community is on the margins of this intellectual revolution, which constitutes a critical gap. The adoption of this perspective is identified as imperative to transcend the merely technical application of procedures. **Conclusion:** this essay proposes and supports the use of the term “fisioterapia crítica” in Portuguese, rather than alternatives such as “pensamento crítico em fisioterapia”, with the aim of standardising terminology, promoting national debate and contributing to the legitimisation of physiotherapy as an autonomous health science.

Keywords: physical therapy specialty; thinking; teaching; evidence-based practice

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RESUMO

Enquadramento: o conceito de “fisioterapia crítica” (*Critical Physiotherapy*) tem-se consolidado globalmente como um movimento essencial que desafia os pressupostos históricos e os paradigmas biomédicos da profissão. **Objetivo:** este ensaio teórico visa fundamentar a utilização da designação “fisioterapia crítica” e explorar as suas origens, os seus princípios fundamentais (baseados na teoria social e filosofia), e analisar o seu impacto na prática, educação e investigação, sublinhando a urgência da sua adoção em Portugal. **Metodologia:** o presente estudo consiste num ensaio teórico reflexivo de caráter narrativo, com base na literatura seminal do movimento de pensamento avançado da *Critical Physiotherapy Network* para fundamentar a argumentação e as perspetivas apresentadas. **Resultados:** a análise da literatura e do contexto português revela que a comunidade nacional se encontra à margem desta revolução intelectual, o que configura uma lacuna crítica. A adoção desta perspetiva é identificada como um imperativo para transcender a aplicação meramente técnica de procedimentos. **Conclusão:** o presente ensaio propõe e sustenta a utilização da designação, em português de Portugal, “fisioterapia crítica” em detrimento de alternativas como “pensamento crítico em fisioterapia”, visando uniformizar a terminologia, impulsionar o debate nacional e a sua utilização contribuir para a legitimação da fisioterapia como ciência da saúde autónoma.

Palavras-chave: especialidade de fisioterapia; pensamento; ensino; prática clínica baseada em evidências

RESUMEN

Marco contextual: el concepto de «fisioterapia crítica» (*Critical Physiotherapy*) se ha consolidado a nivel mundial como un movimiento esencial que desafía los supuestos históricos y los paradigmas biomédicos de la profesión. **Objetivo:** este ensayo teórico tiene como objetivo fundamentar el uso de la denominación «fisioterapia crítica» y explorar sus orígenes, sus principios fundamentales (basados en la teoría social y la filosofía), y analizar su impacto en la práctica, la educación y la investigación, subrayando la urgencia de su adopción en Portugal. **Metodología:** el presente estudio consiste en un ensayo teórico reflexivo, basado en la literatura seminal de la *Critical Physiotherapy Network* para fundamentar la argumentación. **Resultados:** el análisis de la literatura y del contexto portugués revela que la comunidad nacional se encuentra al margen de esta revolución intelectual, lo que constituye una laguna crítica. La adopción de esta perspectiva se identifica como un imperativo para trascender la aplicación meramente técnica de los procedimientos. **Conclusión:** el presente ensayo propone y defiende la denominación, en portugués de Portugal, «fisioterapia crítica» en detrimento de alternativas como «pensamento crítico em fisioterapia», buscando uniformizar la terminología, impulsar el debate nacional y contribuir a la legitimación de la fisioterapia como ciencia de la salud autónoma.

Palabras clave: especialidad de fisioterapia; pensamiento; enseñanza; práctica clínica basada en la evidencia



INTRODUCTION

Physiotherapy, as a health profession, has traditionally been rooted in biomedical paradigms which, although fundamental, sometimes limit a broader understanding of health and disease. The field of critical physiotherapy (designated in Portuguese as *pensamento crítico em fisioterapia*) has been actively developed by research groups over the last decade (Gibson et al., 2018; Nicholls et al., 2023; Nicholls, 2024). According to Nicholls et al. (2023), critical physiotherapy is rapidly expanding and is currently considered a professional subdiscipline. The adoption of the Portuguese term 'fisioterapia crítica' in this article aims to reflect the emergence of this movement at a global level, consolidating a new term for thinking and practice in Portugal that questions the assumptions of the profession. It thus encompasses the social, philosophical and power dimensions inherent in the English term 'critical physiotherapy'.

It must be emphasised that the use of the word 'critical' refers to the application of social theories to challenge entrenched assumptions and forms of power, with the aim of creating space for new ways of thinking and practising (Grimwood, 2023; Nicholls et al., 2023). Notably, as supported by Nicholls et al. (2023, p.9), the use of the word 'critical' in the context of 'critical physiotherapy' can cause confusion when referring to critical cardiorespiratory care in physiotherapy. However, this situation can be overcome, as it refers differently and objectively to methods of critical social analysis that challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and expose entrenched and asymmetrical forms of power, without generating thematic or unwarranted conflict with the aforementioned context. This condition appears to be

similar in the Portuguese case, but from the current perspective, it emphasises the importance of this analysis by considering the designation 'fisioterapia crítica' to be effective in its ability to generate space for new forms of thinking and practice, reinforcing that the loss of the word 'crítica' impoverishes the movement's reach in Portugal. This approach calls for continuous reflection on the relevance, effectiveness and direction of the profession (Nicholls, 2017). However, the Portuguese physiotherapy community seems to be on the sidelines of this fundamental intellectual revolution, with potential consequences for the quality of care provided to the population if we consider Nicholls' (2017) perspective that the profession is at risk of becoming irrelevant, remaining stuck in the historical 'body-machine' model in the face of today's complex health challenges.

Critical physiotherapy is not just an academic luxury, but an imperative necessity for the evolution of the profession, which transcends the merely technical application of procedures. This approach investigates philosophical, historical, ethical, and social aspects of the profession, generating challenges and proposing solutions capable of improving policies, education, research, and clinical practices. This broader and more in-depth perspective is crucial in supporting and legitimising physiotherapy as an autonomous and socially responsible health science (Gibson et al., 2018).

DEVELOPMENT/DISSERTATION

The birth of a movement: The Critical Physiotherapy Network (CPN)

Clear evidence of this global trend is the creation of the Critical Physiotherapy Network (CPN) in 2014. This

international group, which is constantly adapting, is dedicated to exploring physiotherapy practices worldwide, stimulating critical thinking among physiotherapists, identifying power asymmetries and studying the history of physiotherapy, among other parameters (Nicholls et al., 2023; Nicholls, 2024). Its digital space for ideas (<http://criticalphysio.net/>) serves as a vital forum for these discussions, however, the absence of Portuguese participants to date is apparently notable.

The CPN has quickly become a vibrant community, bringing together more than a thousand people from over 50 countries, its rapid growth demonstrating the pressing need for critical thinking in the profession and the readiness of professionals to embrace it (Nicholls et al., 2023). Since 2014, the international CPN group, which includes researchers such as David A. Nicholls and Barbara Gibson, has promoted meetings and scientific publications aimed at driving the desired change through critical thinking in physiotherapy (Gibson, 2018; Nicholls et al., 2023; Nicholls, 2024). These efforts demonstrate the commitment of a significant portion of the international community to raising the level of reflection and practice in physiotherapy.

In line with its dynamism, CPN announced the launch of its Strategic Plan 2025-2028. This plan aims to guide the network's direction with a focus on two main priorities: at the operational level, the optimisation of communication and the development of 'critical products' (such as virtual lectures and workshops) stand out; and, at the strategic level, the goal is to amplify the perspectives of historically marginalised communities and support the practice of 'critical physiotherapy' (Andrion, 2025).

What is 'critical physiotherapy'?

'Critical physiotherapy' aims to be a lens through which the profession is examined. It encourages physiotherapists to:

- Question assumptions: It challenges over-reliance on anatomy and pathology, as well as the 'body as machine' view that often permeates rehabilitation. Seek to elevate analysis beyond the ordinary, incorporating philosophy to extract insights that would otherwise not be possible (Gibson, 2016; Gibson, 2018; Nicholls et al., 2023). In this regard, David Nicholls, based on the philosophy of Michel Foucault (1926-1984), argues that power is not something one has, but that it is omnipresent, shaping the practices and discourses of the profession (Nicholls, 2012; Nicholls, 2017). Foucault's 'power-knowledge' is the basis for his argument, helping to reveal how the physiotherapy knowledge model is rooted in power structures that define who 'has' and who 'does not have' health.
- Analysing social and cultural contexts: Recognises that health, illness and rehabilitation are influenced by social, cultural and institutional factors. Critical physiotherapy explores how practices and assumptions operate, encouraging physiotherapists to listen to and consider the experiences, values, and beliefs of their patients, adapting their practice to be more relevant and culturally sensitive (Gibson, 2018; Nicholls et al., 2023; Forslund et al., 2023).
- Integrating diverse theories: It uses theories from various disciplines – sociology, philosophy,

history, ethics – to enrich the understanding of physiotherapy. This allows for a more nuanced and contextualised approach to health problems (Gibson, 2018).

- Promoting advanced clinical reasoning: Although clinical reasoning is central to physiotherapy as a fundamental skill for professional development (Alves & Lopes, 2022), the critical approach emphasises the importance of developing minds capable of critiquing, verifying and not passively accepting all propositions (Santana, 2011; Franco et al., 2011). In other words, a person with critical thinking does not passively accept all propositions but instead develops the ability to actively analyse, verify and judge ideas (Franco et al., 2011). University learning, in particular, should involve the acquisition and mastery of scientific knowledge and techniques in a critical manner (Keiller & Hanekom, 2014; Santana, 2011). Grimwood (2023) emphasises that critical thinking should be considered as something that emerges in professional practice along a continuum, acting as a tool capable of improving decision-making. Its use ranges from the development of good practice guides to its application in actions led by working groups, academics or activists (Grimwood, 2023). This breadth of application underlines its indispensability in all spheres of physiotherapy.

Physiotherapy and the call for critical reflection

Physiotherapy, as a professional practice, is based on objective and scientific criteria, using scientifically verified strategies to ensure the validity of the theories that support them and facilitate their intervention

(Verde, 2022). However, researcher David A. Nicholls (2017) notes a worrying paradox: most physiotherapists are unaware of the history of physiotherapy, while other professions seem to be taking on roles that have traditionally been their domain (Nicholls, 2017). In light of these findings, Nicholls calls for urgent change, achievable through critical thinking. It is in this context that the gap between theory, such as the applicability of the ICF (International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health) model, and daily practice becomes evident, underlining the need for an approach that goes beyond the mere application of protocols (Nicholls, 2017).

This difference is a symptom of the inadequacy of a purely technical view of physiotherapy and can be overcome by actively integrating the principles of ‘critical physiotherapy’ into teaching and clinical practice. This makes it possible to actively incorporate the contextual, social and ethical factors of users, allowing the complexity of the ICF to be translated into the reality experienced by the individual.

Importance of ‘critical physiotherapy’

The adoption of critical thinking in physiotherapy is imperative for the evolution of the profession. Its importance manifests itself in many ways:

- Improvement of clinical practice: By challenging conventional approaches, ‘critical physiotherapy’ encourages professionals to consider multiple perspectives on movement, pain and care. This can lead to more holistic, person-centred and culturally sensitive interventions, recognising, for example, the role of the body, touch and movement beyond purely biomedical approaches (Gibson, 2018;

Gibson et al., 2018). For example, according to Thille et al. (2025), movement transcends the physical context, encompassing social, cultural, emotional, and political aspects (Thille et al., 2025).

- Transformative education: The promotion of critical thinking is essential in the training of future physiotherapists. Despite the identification of barriers to the implementation of teaching strategies that promote critical thinking in physiotherapy courses (Santana, 2011), there is a need to empower students to make informed decisions and judgements in clinical practice (Keiller & Hanekom, 2014). This approach encourages the exploration of various disciplines, such as anthropology, philosophy, sociology, and history, with the aim of promoting more informed thinking and challenging the limits of the profession.
- Innovation and professional reinvention: 'Critical physiotherapy' encourages the profession to reinvent itself and adapt to the challenges of the 21st century. David Nicholls (2017) argues that the 'end' of the profession is not its disappearance, but rather the need for a paradigm shift, to move away from its historical 'body-machine' model to become relevant to an ageing population with chronic diseases. This includes reflection on the impact of technologies such as artificial intelligence, changes in user expectations, and the need for interprofessional collaboration (Nicholls, 2017). Thus, the growing discussion about the need for healthcare professionals to be more than mere 'technical rationalists' drives the search for new forms of person-centred practice (Nicholls, 2024; The Scottish Government, 2022).
- Addressing complex health challenges: Chronic health problems such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and mental health require more complex approaches than purely biomedical solutions. Critical physiotherapy allows professionals to address these challenges with a deeper understanding of their social and systemic roots. This perspective translates into the objective result of clarifying the physiotherapy community by highlighting the ethical and deontological duty of the profession to assume its responsibility in promoting health equity and actively acting on social determinants, reinforcing its role as an agent of change (Gibson, 2016; Forslund et al., 2023; Thille et al., 2025).
- Awakening to philosophy in physiotherapy: Although historically philosophy may have been seen as separate from physiotherapy, 'critical physiotherapy' promotes its integration, leading to deeper discussions on various topics, such as touch and pain (Nicholls, 2017; Nicholls et al., 2023).
- The power and monopoly of the profession: A crucial perspective of 'critical physiotherapy', based on the work of David Nicholls (2017), is the need to recognise and confront negative aspects that may emerge from the very structure of the profession. Nicholls' analysis, based on the French philosopher Michel Foucault, reveals that physiotherapy's quest for legitimacy and prestige, by aligning itself with the biomedical model and the view of the 'body

as a machine', has created a 'governmentality' that can restrict the curriculum and practice. The profession, in its quest for power and monopoly over knowledge, may inadvertently contribute to social inequalities and limit access to care, reinforcing the urgency of a critical approach (Nicholls, 2012; Nicholls, 2017).

The debate in Portugal

In the Portuguese context, critical thinking initiatives in physiotherapy are limited. The apparent absence of Portuguese elements in the CPN reflects this reality. However, an analysis of the local ecosystem reveals the existence of projects such as the MOVE.TE (<https://movetesaude.wixsite.com/move-te>), which promotes principles linked to 'critical physiotherapy', whose mission is focused on advocacy, the articulation between higher education and clinical practice, and active citizenship, demonstrating an objective that transcends the simple replication of treatment models. However, the platform appears to be inactive. Nevertheless, the case of the MOVE.TE platform is an example to be preserved, as it deals with issues of equity, accessibility, and knowledge translation, which are central pillars of the critical agenda (Barbosa et al., 2020).

This context of emerging initiatives and the need to move beyond the purely biomedical paradigm require physiotherapists in Portugal to take a more active role in defining the future of their profession, adopting a stance as agents of change in line with the perspective of Thille et al. (2025) regarding the movement to go beyond the physical, encompassing social, cultural, emotional, and political aspects.

Three critical positions

Critical physiotherapy represents a significant advance for the profession, moving it beyond a purely technical and scientific perspective. This emerging field, which has been expanding over the last decade, can be categorised into three distinct but interconnected critical positions that share a common critique of the profession's historical approach to health and illness. As articulated by Nicholls et al. (2023), these approaches broadly align with three underlying philosophies: one that emphasises lived experience, one based on social theory, and finally, those that fall within new philosophical currents (new materialism, posthumanism, postmodernism). The first, focused on lived experience, critiques the objectification of the body and the reduction of the user's experience to a set of clinical data, prioritising the narrative and subjective meaning of the disease. The second, rooted in social theory, transcends individual analysis to examine how power structures and social determinants shape health, critiquing the profession's tendency to focus on managing individual behaviours at the expense of systemic issues. Finally, 'post' philosophies represent the most radical critique, questioning the very ontological and epistemological foundations of physiotherapy, challenging the 'body-as-machine' metaphor and the position of the physiotherapist as a neutral and distant 'expert'. By encouraging systematic questioning, consideration of social and cultural contexts, integration of diverse theories, and enhancement of critical thinking, 'critical physiotherapy' empowers professionals to practise in a more conscious, effective manner that is adapted to the complexities of human health (Nicholls et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

Open perspectives: The ‘critical physiotherapist’ as an agent of change

‘Critical physiotherapists’ reject the pursuit of a singular, uniform professional image. Instead, they advocate for a pluralism of practices that leads to ‘1000 physiotherapies’ (Nicholls et al., 2023, p.9). The central focus of this movement is the clarification, concretisation and multiplication of philosophical assumptions and their practical implications, something they consider fundamental to the evolution of physiotherapy (Nicholls et al., 2023).

However, this article questions whether the emergence of this fragmentation of approaches might undermine physiotherapy as a cohesive profession.

Furthermore, considering that philosophical theoretical knowledge is an intellectual barrier to entry for some physiotherapists, it questions the possibility of the emergence of an intellectual distance from a certain elite or an exclusive subdomain for some elements. This contrasts with the fundamental objective of ‘critical physiotherapy’ to equip all professionals with the critical social and philosophical reasoning necessary to transcend the merely technical application of procedures.

In short, ‘critical physiotherapy’ is not presented as a new treatment method, but rather as an invitation to reflect deeply on the philosophical and social foundations of the profession. Its urgency, and the need to adopt the designation ‘fisioterapia crítica’ in European Portuguese, lies in the imperative for the profession to transcend its historical model of ‘the body as a machine’. This conceptual and paradigm shift is crucial to shaping a more robust, relevant and humanised physiotherapy, capable of responding to

complex global health challenges and ensuring the legitimacy of the profession as an autonomous health science.

The reflection presented here reveals, as the main limitation of the study, the scarcity of national literature that formally addresses this topic.

The implications for health sciences and education are profound, requiring curricula and practice to integrate the systematic questioning of biomedical assumptions and consideration of social and cultural contexts, in line with the community agenda promoted by the CPN. Finally, it is suggested for future research: conducting qualitative studies on the perceived barriers to the implementation of ‘critical physiotherapy’ in Portugal; and exploring how the emergence of pluralism of approaches (‘1000 physiotherapies’) can remove or strengthen the power of physiotherapy as a cohesive profession, thus addressing the issue raised in this article.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest, whether personal, commercial, academic, political, or financial, that could interfere with the impartiality and validity of the arguments and conclusions presented in this theoretical article.

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