

EMBODIMENT

Why read this text ...

The concept of embodiment allows us to see the human body not just as a taken-for-granted biological object but also as a sociocultural entity that actively participates in the creation of social meaning and relations to other entities and the world. In this perspective, the human body is a source of experience created through inter-subjective communication during which social norms, values and beliefs are played out, reproduced and negotiated. The concept of embodiment allows us to explore relations between body culture, social practice and the representation of individual and collective selves.

Embodiment is a way of conceptualizing personhood. It addresses the ways the embodied self is performed in social interaction, and given significance through discursive practices, power struggles, discriminatory behavior, and identification and categorization processes.

In the school environment of a Christian, western European country the use of hijab (a veil worn by Muslim women that covers the head and chest) by a female migrant or refugee student that is related to religious beliefs (need to cover certain parts of the female body in the presence of any male outside the immediate family) might stigmatize them.

Moreover, in a cultural context where the dominant ideal about the male and/or female body is the 'thin body', students with a thin body shape might enjoy a greater degree of social acceptance and higher status than those with a corpulent body who might attract derogatory nicknames and discriminatory behavior. In the same manner, a tattooed or a pierced male or female student might experience criticism or rejection by students and/or teachers because of their bodily appearance which could be perceived as an act of challenging the prevailing rules and ideas of appropriate behavior.

Historical Context

The concept of embodiment is used in the social sciences to discuss the body as a social and cultural phenomenon. Much European thinking has viewed the body as a biological background to social life. In an early study of the cultural and social dimensions of the body, Hertz (2013 [1909]) pointed to the symbolic preeminence of the right hand. More famously, Marcel Mauss conceived of the body as a social product and introduced *techniques of the body* as ways in which humans understand culturally learned bodily behaviour as self-evident (1973 [1935]). In his discussion of the person, Mauss linked his ideas about the body with the concept of person suggesting that all humans have a sense of spiritual and corporal individuality (1985 [1938]).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the body gained prominence as a topic of theoretical and ethnographic concern. In his analysis of perception, the philosopher Maurice Merleau-

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Ponty (1982 [1962]) used the concept of embodiment to understand ways of knowing and experiencing the world around us through our own bodies. He suggested that a focus on the body raises awareness of the sensory world, of our self-perception and self identity. Mary Douglas (1973) explored symbolic aspects of the body and related social meanings. She proposed the idea of “two bodies”, the physical and social, and argued that the social body constrains how we perceive and experience the physical body. For Douglas, the body is an image of society thus various forms of social control draw on dominant ideas of society and appropriately regulated and controlled bodies .

Current scholarship on the body has been heavily influenced by feminist and social constructionist perspectives. In this view, the social body, constructed in terms of dominant social practices or cultural norms, is the product of social processes. This approach holds that the meanings attributed to the body and the boundaries that exist between the bodies of different groups are social products. The way people see themselves and others is shaped not only by biology but also by the social worlds in which they live. In addition, people construct certain expectations and ideas about male and female bodies that serve as mechanisms of social power and control.

a) Discussion

Embodiment relates to the process of understanding the world through lived bodily experience. The notion conceptualizes the body as a social construct that is produced both physically (biologically) and socioculturally). In this respect, the body in anthropology has been examined through three different perspectives: (a) as a phenomenologically experienced individual body-self, that is to say, each subject understands the particularity of his or her own body, b) as a social or symbolic body representing the relations between nature and society as expressed by culture; and (c) as a political body upon which policies of control and power are inscribed in their various dimensions (reproduction, work, health) (Featherstone 1991, Csordas 1994, Weiss and Haber 1999).

Foucault ([1973] 1994) expressed the view that the way humans see the body is influenced by dominant discourses, that is systems of thought composed of ideas attitudes, courses of action beliefs and practices that construct the subjects and the world of which they speak. Views of the body vary from society to society depending on which ideologies gain hegemony in a particular cultural setting. As such, the body is a direct way for certain members of the society to implement control. Institutional power such as that found in schools shapes both appearances and the practices relating to the individual body.

b) Practical Example

Schools are social institutions where manifestations of discipline, control and power can be observed in everyday practices. Neill and Caswell (1993) have argued that teachers should be trained to recognise and decipher pupils’ body language (gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice) such that they are prepared to counteract student challenges to their authority.

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In her study of two schools in northern England, Simpson (2000) observed the transition of students from primary to secondary level and explained the importance of the concept of embodiment in understanding the ways power relations are encoded and exercised within schools. From the first day at the secondary school, teachers reminded pupils of the need for bodily control and compliance (no shouting or speaking without permission, stay in your seat unless you have permission to leave, no gum-chewing). Failure to conform resulted in a predetermined set of consequences (e.g a warning, name on the board, detention, contact to parents). Those who followed the rules received a stamp for “good behaviour” or were allowed to play games or watch videos of their choice (62).

Simpson claimed that one purpose of school curricula is to ensure that students are effectively supervised and disciplined, particularly in relation to bodily expression and use of physical space (63). The 'curriculum of the body' prescribes in detail what counts as acceptable behaviour (no running, no chewing gum, no leaving the classroom until the bell rings etc.). The school staff tried to enforce discipline by pointing out that rules and constraints are for students' own safety (68). Schools regulated pupils' bodily appearance and self-presentation through dress policies (no make-up or nail varnish, all shirts tucked into trousers or skirts). Students' bodies should conform to visual and behavioural aesthetics. In dealing with misbehaviour, secondary school teachers deployed stereotypes of age, physical appearance and appropriate behavior (“you’re bigger now, no longer at junior school”). Wrongdoings were attributed to the fact that the children hadn’t yet mastered the bodily control expected in secondary schools (70-74).

Thinking further:

- How do cultural assumptions and values shape our ideas about the body?
- How do different conceptions of the body affect educational practices? And vice versa?
- How do bodily practices reflect dominant ideologies about the self and its being in the world?
- How do school regulations and teachers disciplinary measures affect bodily expression?
- What forms of resistance to discipline and control, and subversions of authority do some students adopt?

KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES

Body, power, identity, cultural practices, representation

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