

6. Embodiment, sexuality and ageing

Overview

As discussed in previous lectures, where there is power, there is resistance. The body is the surface upon which discourses act to discipline and regulate 'age appropriateness', and society's norms are transmitted in such a way as to appear 'taken for granted' or 'common sense'. These discourses take the form of external rules and expectations, and the ways in which we come to see these rules as normal is sometimes described as being embodied. Embodied regulatory ideals become part of the individual's lived experience. In this lecture we explore some theoretical understandings about embodiment from a sociological perspective, look at the ways in which dominant discourses act to shape the body and human behaviour and at the ways in which individuals resist these discourses.

Objectives

By the end of this topic you will have:

- Reflected on different theories of embodiment, including those of Butler, Bourdieu and Foucault.
- Identified the ways in which discourses about ageing and sexuality are embodied and play out for older people.
- Considered the implications of this topic for your own practice.

Key Concepts

The body, body image, identity, attitudes towards sexuality, theories of embodiment

Required reading

Calasanti, T.M. & Slevin, K.F. (2001). Chapter 3. Bodies in Old Age in *Gender, Social Inequalities and Aging*. AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek CA.

Walz, T. (2002). Crones, Dirty Old Men, Sexy Seniors: Representations of the Sexuality of Older Persons. *Journal of Aging and Identity*, 7(2), 99-112.

Further reading

Halliwell, E., & Dittmar, H. (2003). A qualitative investigation of women's and men's body image: image concerns and their attitudes towards aging. *Sex Roles: a journal of research*, 49(11-12), 675+.

Lecture Notes

The physical body is the primary site for both internal and external signs of ageing, and as such is an important part of the study of ageing. The notion of embodiment – the ways in which societal rules and discourses are internalised and play out in different ways – is equally as important. Sociology is interested in the systematic study of society, including patterns of

social relationships, social interaction, and culture. In this area of study, understanding the phenomenon of embodiment is as important as understanding the physiological experience of ageing. This draws a distinction between the objective (or physical) body and the subjective body, which is the body as we experience it. This distinction between the objective and subjective body is central to understanding the phenomenological treatment of embodiment.

Theories of Embodiment

Phenomenology

Phenomenology offers a framework for the study of experience from the perspective of the individual. It is concerned with discovering and understanding the meaning of individual lived experience, and is driven by a desire to understand and explain the phenomenon under study (Lester, 1999).

Phenomenological theories of embodiment have been concerned to distinguish between the various (essentialist) physiological and biological causalities that structure bodily existence, and the meaning that embodied experience assumes in the context of lived experience (Butler, 1986). Drawing on the phenomenology of French philosopher, Merleau-Ponty, Butler explained that, rather than viewing bodily experience from an essentialist perspective, Merleau-Ponty claimed that the body is an 'historical idea' rather than a 'natural species' (Butler, 1986 p. 520). From this perspective, the body can be understood as being in an active process of embodying certain historical and cultural possibilities, and that this complicated process is one which any phenomenological theory of embodiment needs to describe (Dyson, 2007).

Foucault

Foucault's main project was to understand power. In his early work, Foucault examined the effect of power on bodies, which resulted in his theory of the 'docile body'. In this theory, the docile subject had no capacity for resistance, and was subject to the power of the State. Foucault saw subjectification as a dual process, that operated via external regulation, as well as internally, as a process through which individuals make themselves subjects (Foucault, 1973). While the formation of subjectivity is an ongoing process, it is not something that the individual invents, but is connected to patterns found in the culture, society or social settings – those things that are so normalised as to be taken for granted. Subjectivity is part of a scheme of relationships of power that are changeable, reversible, unstable and capable of modification, and is therefore not given once and for all (Foucault et al., 1988).

Foucault described how, in the eighteenth century, a shift occurred from power being held by the Church, to being located in the modern Nation State. In this shift, power that had for centuries been held by the church was now diffused and located across a number of institutions, including the family, medicine, the sciences, and education. These institutions carried out surveillance of the whole social body on behalf of the State. As a result, individuals in the social structure became subject to the state.

In his later work, Foucault developed the idea of the 'reflexive subject'. In this view, power is exercised not possessed, its operations are multiple and diffuse, it can be productive as well as repressive, and where power exists, resistance is inevitable (Foucault, 1982). In this formulation, instead of operating as a force exercised over others, power operates in relations between individuals and/or groups. In these relations power circulates in 'discursive networks' or chains through the whole social structure (Otto, 1999). He explained the

intimate operations of power on the individual as 'care of the self'. Care of the self is a social exercise, an activity practised by individuals, as resistance against normalising effects of biopower (Infinito, 2003).

Foucault's theory of governmentality (see lecture 4) can be understood as the embodiment of technologies of power, which interact to modify individuals as they acquire skills and attitudes. Self-monitoring and self-regulation come about as a result of the normalising effects of power, which reduces the need for the external imposition of power to modify our actions.

Bourdieu

Whereas Foucault's focus was on the reflexive subject, Bourdieu insisted that practice is always informed by the individual's actions as an agent. Bourdieu provided a dynamic theory of embodiment that enabled a differentiated analysis of social context. He theorised that societal values, norms, and ideas come to be fixed in the body as 'ways of being' which manifest in postures, gestures, ways of standing, walking, thinking, and speaking. They are 'embodied social structures' (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 467). These are internalised by individuals through socialisation and form the basis of principles that classify the social world. However, because we continually interact with the social and material world, these principles are continually changing and generate a potentially infinite number of possibilities for behaviour, thought and expression that are not only unpredictable, but also limited in their diversity (Bourdieu, 1990).

Habitus can be defined as a system of durable "dispositions" (lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought and action). Bourdieu posited that individuals are shaped by their experience, initially by the inculcation of culture and values, which are learned through exposure to signs. This constitutes a kind of collective habitus, which is constituted in 'things and minds', and is embodied (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Whereas Foucault's focus was on the reflexive subject, Bourdieu insisted that practice is always informed by the individual's actions as an agent. He asserted that the possibilities of agency must be understood and contextualised in terms of its relation to the objective structures of a culture, which he referred to as cultural fields.

Gender roles provides a way of conceptualising the habitus. 'Knowledge' about normative gender roles for men and women is not consciously learned or memorised, but is enacted at a pre-reflexive level through bodily dispositions. These dispositions are not mechanically learned, but are lived categories (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The embodiment of the habitus makes it inseparable from social practices.

Embodiment and Ageing

Why is understanding the sociological concept of embodiment important for the study of ageing? Because the focus of most work to do with ageing is on the physical body, for example in relation to staying youthful, correcting physical signs of ageing or caring for the physical body, little is understood about how embodied knowledge about what it means to age impacts on the lived experience of ageing. For example, discourses about age appropriate behaviour, when to expect to retire, when to expect to be taken care of, can become embodied and influence an individual's life course. Perhaps more problematic is the pressure for the physical body to remain youthful. To consume the burgeoning industry that promises youthfulness through exercise, cosmetics or surgery or not becomes a question for women

and men as they age. Embodied ideals about age and beauty can have a powerful influence on decisions about what it means to age in contemporary society.

Body image and self identity

Calasanti & Slevin discuss the ways in which old bodies are shaped and experienced in and through discourse. The lived experience of how old bodies are constructed in contemporary society can be seen in physical appearance and behaviour. The way individuals experience the constructed body is through body image, the ways in which we perceive our own external appearance. Body image is strongly influenced by societal norms about physical beauty and desirable attributes for women and men in any given culture.

Attitudes towards sexuality among older people

Reflection: In your required reading for this lecture, what do Calasanti and Slevin have to say about the ageing body in contemporary society?

Identify the different ways in which modern forms of bodily disciplines are embodied by women and men, and how these might be seen to play out for older people, both in how they are perceived by others, and how they perceive themselves.

Write about these reflections in your journal.

Activity

Body image and self identity are shaped by dominant discourses, but, as we discussed in lecture 4, where there is power (for example a dominant discourse) there is always resistance. Resistance can be found in those discourses that challenge dominant discourses, which are called subjugated discourses.

Read Jenny Joseph's poem (below) and reflect on what she is doing discursively.

When I am Old I will wear Purple!

Jenny Joseph

When I am an old woman,
I shall wear purple - -
With a red hat which doesn't go,
and doesn't suit me.
And I shall spend my pension
on brandy and summer gloves and satin sandals,
And say we've no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
and gobble up samples in shops
and press alarm bells
and run with my stick along public railings,
and make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
and pick flowers in other people's gardens
and learn to spit!
You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat
and eat three pounds of sausages at a go,
or only bread and pickles for a week,

and hoard pens and pencils
and beer mats and things in boxes.

But now we must have clothes that keep us dry,
and pay our rent
and not swear in the street,
and set a good example for the children.
We must have friends to dinner
and read the papers.
But maybe I ought to practice a little now?
So people who know me
are not too shocked and surprised
when suddenly I am old,
And start to wear purple!

Journal work: Reflect on the ways in which the poem resists discourses about growing old.
Use the following questions to prompt your journal work.

- What dominant discourses is Joseph contesting?
- What subjugated discourses is she promoting in relation to old women?