



The Social Construction of the Body and Embodiment

“Social life depends upon the
successful presenting, monitoring and
interpreting of bodies” -Bryan Turner

Understanding the Theory of Embodiment



Self is inseparable from the body. Bodily feelings and experiences impact inner life and self concept. The social meaning of our bodies shapes how we develop a sense of self. The theory of embodiment examines this link between the physical body and a social identity. We display, regulate, and manage our bodies in ways that embody gender, culture, and power. One way to see this theory is through bodily change and how that new bodily experience impacts identity. In the two images above, each individual has experienced a change in their physical body. Think about how this physical change would impact identity— how do they see their bodies and identity in relation to social meanings of gender, health, sexual attraction, and power?

Key Ideas in the Construction of the Body

1. Culture becomes inscribed or written onto our bodies.

Our bodies represent social meanings of age, race, gender, and ethnicity. These cultural meanings inform interactions, relationships, and presentation of identity. How we move, dress, and care for our bodies is shaped by cultural norms and social roles. We discipline or control our bodies in ways to conform to cultural beliefs about gender, race, age, and sexuality.



2. Gender socialization results in learning ways to “do gender” in bodily practices.

“Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (West and Zimmerman). We participate in interaction and activities that are organized around and express gender difference. What are our cultural understandings of masculinity and femininity? These cultural beliefs that become norms frame the ways we evaluate gender performance and create gender roles and expectations that can feel “natural”, but are socially constructed.

Key Ideas in the Construction of the Body

3. Individuals are capable to formulate their responses to cultural directives and bodily experiences.

While socialization constructs dominate cultural meanings and understandings of bodily experiences, individuals do not simply internalize and follow social expectations. We have the ability to reflect and interpret social meanings to make sense of our embodied identities. We can challenge and contest the meaning attached to our bodies.



4. While there is individual choice in bodily practices, we are not exercising as much freedom as we think.



Even when we challenge dominant bodily norms, we often still rely on other aspects of culture. In contemporary society, culture is increasingly commodified. The products we buy are not just meeting a need. They tell us something about our identities. What may seem like a uniquely individual choice or bodily expression is often connected to consumer culture.

Summary of the Readings

The readings provide empirical examples of how we embody gender, culture, and power. Each reading utilizes embodiment as a theoretical foundation and demonstrates the ways in which our identities are managed, expressed, and disciplined through our bodies.

In the selection by Martin, This selection explores the early roots of gender differences in physicality. Martin draws on extensive observation by herself and a research assistant at two different preschools to expose a hidden curriculum that facilitates and encourages the construction of bodily differences between genders and makes the physical differences appear and feel natural. She pays particular attention to bodily adornment, the formality of behavior, controlling voice, bodily instructions, and physical interaction among children.

The selection by Orend and Gagné draws on twenty-one in-depth interviews with individuals who have chosen a corporate logo as a permanent tattoo to explore the growing adoption of these types of tattoos and people's feelings about the meanings of them. Orend and Gagné find that brand loyalty played an important role in individuals deciding to get the tattoos. Interviewees felt that the logos signified a personal and group identity and an adherence to a lifestyle associated with the brand or chose to appropriate the logo and give it new meaning.

Diagnoses of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are a classic example of medicalization, where a wider and wider range of characteristics and behaviors are redefined as medical problems. The Loe and Cuttino article relies on qualitative data to explore the lived experiences of those with ADHD, with particular attention on how they manage their consumption of medication to construct their identity. An irony emerges from the interviews; for many respondents to feel in control of their identity, they must give up control by taking medication.