

Postmodern Openings

ISSN: 2068 – 0236 (print), ISSN: 2069 – 9387 (electronic)

Coverd in: Index Copernicus, Ideas RePeC, EconPapers, Socionet,
Ulrich Pro Quest, Cabel, SSRN, Appreciative Inquiry Commons,
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Postmodern Openings, 2012, Volume 3, Issue 4, December, pp: 121-135

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://postmodernopenings.com>

Published by:

Lumen Publishing House

On behalf of:

Lumen Research Center in Social and Humanistic Sciences

Conceptualizing and Researching the Body: A Comparison Between the Psychological and the Cultural Studies Approaches

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Abstract

Given the multiplication of social science investigations on the body, the topics of research and the interpretation grids employed have become more and more diverse. We compare two major perspectives on the body-related experiences and behaviors – the psychological and the cultural studies approaches – emphasizing a set of important differences in the topics that have drawn the scholars' interest and, in general, in the manners of conceptualizing the body. We present the core conceptual networks of each approach and some of the illustrative investigations carried out so far in the respective areas. Both highlight a set of significant differences on several layers, such as the external / internal localization of relevant factors of body-related experiences, the neutral / pathologically – oriented discourse on these experiences, the degree of exploration of their phenomenological realm, the more or less extended focus on the aesthetic evaluation of one's body and the prevalent search for causes / purposes of the body experiences and uses.

Keywords

body, body-related experiences, body modifications, psychology, cultural studies, comparison

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The body has gradually become a significant research topic for social scientists from all fields. The studies on the way people experience, relate to, define and use their bodies greatly multiplied during the last decades, and this scientific interest spurred from and paralleled the drastic cultural and technological changes relevant to the human body. Among other important reasons for this interest, we can invoke the ever increasing cultural focus on the body, especially on its appearance (Berry, 2008), accompanying and fueling the technological developments addressing its various features. These advances in the available body modification tools have transformed it in a malleable tool in the quest for specific individual purposes. As a result, the body has become a multifaceted object of investigation, scientifically attractive for most social sciences approaches. Consequently, the relationships people have with their bodies, the body related subjective experiences and behaviors, its inscription in and relevance for the whole individual existence have become increasingly frequent research topics in social sciences.

The present study: goal and plan of comparison

The goal of the present article is to provide a synthetic comparison between two major related approaches on the relationships people develop with their body: the psychological and the cultural studies. While the scientific identity of the former is well established, further clarifications are needed concerning the latter. “Cultural studies” might be the most comprehensive term to cover a large body of research on the body, inspired by various theories and approaches, most of them from the realm of sociology and anthropology: social constructivism, social phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, feminism, the theories of Bourdieu, Giddens, Foucault, etc., but also from social psychology (discourse analysis). The term “cultural studies” was coined and has been employed by the researchers in this field (e.g. Mutman, 1999) to avoid any specific affiliation to “traditional” social sciences and to emphasize the heterogeneous theoretical perspectives employed.

The center of gravity of the psychological studies on the body is the concept of “body image”, defined as a static and individually – specific view on one’s body, thus replicating the general focus on the individual that characterizes the psychological science. Conversely, the cultural studies are preoccupied with the socially shared meanings of the body, as representative for groups of people defined by a specific culture

or subculture, segmented through various criteria (for instance, the bodybuilders' subculture – Lewis, 2000). This first difference between the two approaches stems from and is consistent with the type of research perspectives privileged in each of the two social sciences – psychology, respectively sociology – anthropology. Nevertheless, beyond this issue of the unit of analysis, there are other significant differences in approach, which are less predictable when taking into account the general scientific paradigms. Specifically, as we will show, the cultural studies are those more interested in the actual subjective – psychological dynamics associated with the experiences of one's body, while the psychological ones are more interested in the external factors of these experiences. Furthermore, the psychological investigations are usually focused on one's body evaluations on the aesthetic criteria; appearance is the most privileged dimension in the psychological accounts of people's relationships to their bodies. Consequently, this approach intends to reveal the pathological aspects of one's body aesthetic apprehensions, searching for the causes of the presumed sub-optimal psychological phenomena in this realm. The cultural studies, on the other hand, are interested in the ways the individual – as representative of his culture – employs and transforms his body in all realms of human existence, researching the purposes – as opposed to the causes – of such personal body-related endeavors. Yet, the cultural set of studies is far less homogenous than the psychological approach; moreover, as it will be pinpointed, the latter finds a close correspondent in the area of cultural studies in what regards this static, externalist, beauty-focused and critical perspective on body experiences: the feminist studies.

In what follows, we briefly present the building blocks of each of the two approaches, moving from their conceptual core to the more peripheral notions, each of which also represent a standalone topic in the contemporary research on the body. We also illustrate the two social science perspectives by a set of representative empirical results, in order to reveal not only their conceptual specificities, but also their distinctiveness in the manners in which body experiences are investigated.

The psychological approach: conceptual core and relevant topics of research

As stated above, most of the psychological studies on this topic revolve around the concept of “body image”. As Grogan (2008) points out, the concept already has a remarkable history, being introduced in the 1950’s by Schilder, who expanded the narrow psychiatric frame of distorted body perceptions – employed thus far in the study of body image – to include its psycho-social references. Yet, this conceptual enlargement proved to be less consensual than expected, as the 60-years gone by brought about a high heterogeneity of the meanings assigned to the concept by various scholars (in 1999, Thompson et al. listed 16 definitions of body image adopted in various research by that time). A general definition is provided by Cash (2002), according to which body image is a multidimensional construct that refers to subjective perceptual and attitudinal experiences about one’s body, particularly one’s physical appearance.

In what regards the core dimensions of body image, Cash (1994) describes two such major components, both described as static psychological facets. The first is an evaluative one – representing the cognitive and emotional result of one’s apprehension of his/her body. The second is the investment dimension, reflecting the importance of one’s appearance for himself/herself. Related studies focus on the development of proper assessment tools in this area (Cash et al., 2004, Labarge et. al, 1998), as well as on the cognitive mediators of the impact of these dimensions on behavior. For instance, appearance-related self-schemas (Cash, 2002), defined as a core facet of body image investment, were found to guide the processing of self-evaluative information about one’s appearance.

As mentioned before, the psychological approach is mostly interested in the external factors that contribute to the internal, subjective assessment and importance of one’s appearance. This externalist view on the body experiences is obvious in the most influential theoretical model in this research area on the construction and development of body image, the Tripartite Influence Model (Keery et al., 2004), which identifies three such influences: peers, parents, and media. The latter represents the core component of a larger dimension – sociocultural influences –, which has been the topic of most investigations in this particular array. The most widely used instrument

addressing it – the *Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire* – had, in its initial versions, a three-factor structure, assuming that the sociocultural impact manifests through awareness, perceived pressures, and internalization of cultural standards, while the dimension of awareness has been discarded from the following versions (Thompson et al., 2004).

As such, body image is frequently investigated as a function of mass-media portrayals of beauty ideals (for example, Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Schooler et al., 2004). An alternative theme refers to the ways in which ethnic minorities confront and resist these White body standards. For instance, Schooler (2004) investigated Latina girls' body image development in the U.S., taking into account their body satisfaction, acculturation and use of mainstream and minorities oriented television – not only Spanish, but also Black. Results show that while frequent viewing of mainstream television is associated with low body image – the usual finding in the area of its mass-media dependency –, frequent viewing of Black-oriented television correlates with greater body satisfaction; this positive effect is stronger among more acculturated adolescents.

Other psychological investigations point out contextual factors – also external to the individual – in body dissatisfaction. In a study by Glauert et al. (2009), such a factor was exposure context: women's perceptions of body normality and ideal were significantly influenced by the thinness of the bodies to which they were exposed before. Developmental factors were also investigated; for example, the results of Grilo et al. (1994) reveal the strong negative impact that teasing in the teenage years can have on the body image evolution of girls. More general cultural dimensions have also been taken into account; an example is the research carried out by Dunkel et al. (2010) on the role of religion in body image dynamics, in interaction with age and dress preferences.

The most popular topic of research derived from the body image concept is body dissatisfaction, defined as the emotional consequence of one's body evaluations. According to the implicit perspective that inspires the investigations in this area, the emotional result of one's assessment on the appearance criterion represents an individually - specific and quite stable feature of his relationship to his body. For

some, the valence of this affective appraisal is negative; those dissatisfied with their bodies should be identified and assisted to overcome their negative body image, as they are exposed to serious psychological risks. First, they might develop body image disturbances, pathologically excessive preoccupations with one's body features. Second, body dissatisfaction is extensively researched as a proximal cause of eating disorders, most research on this topic focusing on the relationship between the two concepts (e.g. (Beato-Fernandez, 2004; Stice, 2002). There is also a group of researches testing various intervention and prevention programs addressing this problem (e.g. Pratt & Woolfenden, 2002). Finally, body dissatisfied individuals are those prone to drastic body modifications procedures aimed at improving their appearance, such as cosmetic surgery. The mediator psychological dimension here, bridging body dissatisfaction with cosmetic surgery intentions, reflects another psychopathological concept – Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) – that might generate „illegitimate” intentions of surgically altering one's appearance. The interest of psychology in the pathological side of body image and modifications has had practical consequences, as the screening of potential cosmetic surgery patients for BDD before the actual procedure has become frequent, at least in the U.S. (Sarwer & Crerand, 2008).

The cultural studies approach: conceptual core and relevant topics of research

Turning to the other major approach on body – related experiences under scrutiny – the cultural studies, Sault (1994, p. 1) puts forth what could be considered their general premise: “we perceive our bodies through a culturally constructed body image that shapes what we see and experience”. Thus, the general aim of the studies included in this category is to offer a hermeneutic of the insertion of the body in society, of its symbolic meanings and practices, of “how bodies are understood, what they mean to society, how they are managed, treated, and transformed, and how they are depicted and represented” (Pitts-Taylor, 2008, p.17). Usually, the empirical works in this array – usually employing interviews, focus-groups or media analysis - reveal the cultural inscriptions and dependencies of the human body by focusing on a specific referent or context in which the body is salient. In each such

setting, the researchers explore the subjective experiences associated to the body, while also revealing their cultural dependencies.

One set of investigations concerns what might be coined as “body work” contexts. For instance, Crossley (2006) reports an ethnographic fieldwork in an UK health club, using a social phenomenological approach in order to explore the motives for and meanings of working out. One of the main reasons extracted from the data was the desire to recapture one’s „former glory” through the physical changes brought by exercise. This motivation has a series of background sources, as revealed by the interviews, appearing in various degrees, such as the (lack of) morality of losing control over one’s body („letting yourself go”), the aesthetics of appearance, as well as the preoccupation with illness and health. Crossley concludes by remarking that the usual sociological approaches on body interventions define them mainly as ways to cultivate the body as object, thus ignoring “the pleasures and purposes of body work at the level of the lived body” – its intimate, psycho-physiological side – as well as the different meanings attached to the body by the subject himself.

In the same body work context, Lewis (2000) explores the practice of adventure climbing as a way of resistance to the tendency brought by modernity to deny the organic character of the body, to transform it in a “metropolitan body”. Also, Monaghan (1999) investigates the meanings of bodybuilding in a seven-year participant observation research, revealing the associations of the muscular body to patriarchal notions of masculinity in bodybuilders, but also the plurality of definitions and standards of this body, as well as the various social processes involved in their development.

A setting in which the body is highly relevant, while simultaneously experienced in line with powerful cultural influences is sexuality, a topic extensively researched in this approach. For instance, Marshall & Katz (2002) offers a historical overview of the changes in the attitudes and practices related to male sexuality in the context of ageing, up to the contemporary cultural fixation on sexual functionality. Erectile dysfunction, as the other side of the coin, is also examined as a cultural concept, pointing to the increasingly medical technologization of male sexuality, which transforms men into potential consumers of pharmacological aids (e.g. Viagra) which would alleviate their culturally

induced sexual anxieties. Another example is Cover's (2003) analysis of the cultural anchoring of nudity, specifically the contemporary ways in which nudity is perceived ("looked upon"). His thesis is that nakedness is becoming more and more associated to sexuality, despite the numerous arrays of contemporary spaces in which such representations of the body would be legitimate, and, thus, exempt from accusations of obscenity. The increased redefinition of nudity as display of sexuality might also explain the conservative pressures towards the forbiddance or strict regulation of body display in any kind of public sphere. In the same realm of the subjective experiences associated to sexuality, Dillaway (2005) explored, through focus-groups and interviews, women's representations of and practices related to menopause. She revealed that most of the women included in the sample defined menopause as problematic, as a "crisis", and, consequently, they attempted to mask their bodily change. Such effects are traced by the author back to two sets of factors: the biomedical discourse, focused on the changes induced by menopause on many levels, as well as the gendered societal beauty ideals which increase the cultural pressures on women in this developmental stage.

The issue of bodily experiences is further illustrated by the cultural studies on pain; for instance, Fournier (2002) analyses pain as inscription of gender on the feminine body, as construction of womanhood in an embodied sense, by exploring the various symbolic references of pain and violence. Drawing on the Foucauldian idea of the body as a meeting point for social regulation and individual practices, the author explores the ways in which pain takes part in the building of women's identity.

While the psychological investigations could also be expected to focus on the personal experiences of people in relationships to their bodies, their predominant interest relies on the individual differences concerning these experiences. Thus, the psychological studies that parallel the aforementioned anthropological lines of investigations do not provide in-depth explorations of the subjective approaches on the body. Instead, they put forth various typologies, differentiating people according to a specific set of criteria. For instance, Domzal & Kernan, (1993) propose a classification of body types on the criteria of one's experience of his own corporality. The two dimensions of this taxonomy are associatedness or corporal salience – the individual's sense of how

much he/she is represented by the body, and focus, reflecting the perceived relationship between one's body and the others', ranging from inner focus (an individuated sense of self) to outer focus (an socially integrated sense of self). According to the authors, each type of body resulted from the intersection of these dimensions has a specific way of deployment, which renders the individual more persuadable by a specific approach of body products marketing. Another manner in which the body - related subjective dynamics is apprehended in psychology is a strictly functional one. In this respect, a topic of growing importance in contemporary cognitive science is "embodied cognition" (e.g. Calvo & Gomila, 2008), a research trend which redefines cognition as the continuous interplay between body, brain, and environment, focusing on the ways in which body experiences can stimulate or guide cognitive activity. Thus, the focus is not on the subjective apprehensions of one's body, but mostly on the ways they influence the content of other mental processes.

Body modifications as a specific common topic

Another topic that allows for direct comparisons between the two approaches is body modifications (tattooing, piercing, aesthetic surgery etc). In line with the constructivist approach prevalent in the cultural studies, their usual approach on this topic is synthesized by the term "body projects", meaning identity constructions, attempts to anchor a stable sense of self-identity by carving it on the flesh. For instance, Sweetman (1999), in his study on piercing and tattooing, explores body modifiers' culture through interviews, and concludes that their body projects are manifestations of refusal of the superficiality of fashion. Instead, such practices attempt to lend "corporeal solidity to expressions of individuality" (p. 53), becoming exteriorizations of the self. Thus, body modifications allow the stabilization of one's sense of self-identity, projected outward, through a coherent self-narrative.

Conversely, psychology has been less interested in the subjective constructions of body modifications, but instead more preoccupied with their causes. Similar to its manner of approaching body experiences, it has focused on the individual differences in this respect, revealing the personal characteristics of the body-modified people. Besides the lecture grid offered by the body image model, presented above as prevalent in

the explanations of beauty-oriented body alterations, psychological studies have also searched for specific personality and behavioral profiles that might lead to body modifications of any kind. For instance, Wolhrab et al. (2007) used five personality scale in order to assess these specific traits. Results revealed certain specificities in sensation-seeking and mating strategies, in the sense that body-modified individuals are greater sensation seekers and follow a more unrestricted mating strategy than the non-modified individuals. Other similar researches have pointed out differences in body consciousness (Delazar, 2005) or high-risk behaviors (Carroll et al., 2002).

Feminism and psychology

We highlighted above the general focus in psychology on the external factors of body experiences and body-relevant behaviors, explicitly asserted, among others, in the Tripartite Influence Model (Keery et al., 2004) of body image development. This externalist perspective, minimizing the individual's responsibility and action space in the construction of his body image, is shared with an important perspective in the cultural studies, namely the feminist approach. The latter identifies the gender - unbalanced distribution of power in society as the main external source of women's relationships to their bodies. Women are target of various cultural forces – especially the contemporary unrealistic beauty ideals and the practices they legitimate – which reduce them to an inferior, unnatural and decorative role (e.g. Jeffreys, 2005; Wolf, 1991) and to an unnatural rapport with their bodies. Due to their permanent cultural oppression, they gradually learn to focus on their appearance, trying to adapt it to the beauty standards imposed by men. Thus, they lose the personal, intimate relationships to their bodies, carrying out a process of self-objectification, of treating their bodies as exterior objects (Jeffreys, 2005).

Consequently, a second similarity between the dominant perspective in psychology and feminism can be noticed: the focus on the negatively charged subjective experiences and behaviors concerning one's body. While many psychological studies focus on body dissatisfaction and the subsequent pathological behaviors it can generate, such as eating disorders, the feminist account highlights the negative relationships women have with their bodies due to the cultural imposition of unrealistic standards of appearance. Moreover, all forms of

appearance enhancement behaviors become suspicious as indicative of self-objectification, of one's interiorization of the ideological definitions of womanhood. Consequently, the most drastic procedure available, in terms of body invasion and investment of personal resources – cosmetic surgery – represents the exponent of the male oppressions on women's body, a complete surrender to the cultural rules of appearance.

Conclusions

Some of the variations between the two approaches stem from their general paradigmatic perspective: a focus on the individual, in the case of psychology, and a search for the social denominations through the analysis of the individual, in the case of the cultural studies. As the investigations briefly presented above illustrate, the latter is mostly concerned with the socially shared definitions of the body, its cultural inscriptions, usually specific to a certain social micro-system.

A significant similarity between the two perspectives is their shared preoccupation with the psychological dynamics that explain and lead to the relationships people have with their bodies. Beyond this convergence in general interest, the cultural studies are those more focused on the phenomenology of these dynamics. Although they employ a cultural frame in the decoding of these processes, emphasizing the social communalities and their cultural relevance, they invest research efforts in the description of the subjective states and changes involved. In contrast, the subjective realm of experiencing one's body has remained a somewhat peripheral topic in psychology; when addressed, researchers have been more interested in typologies, segmenting people on various relevant criteria. The same interest in classification is prevalent in the psychological studies on the attitudes people have towards their bodies. In this respect, another significant difference between approaches is the psychological focus on the aesthetic criterion. While appearance is the most extensively documented layer in the psychological approach on the relationships people develop with their bodies, the cultural studies have addressed a much wider array of topics, moving beyond its evaluations to its use and transformations.

Moreover, while psychology has been searching for the external sources of one's body assessments, the cultural studies also take into account the purposes – socially shared – to which the body is put. This

brings further differences in the valence of the body – related discourse in the two approaches: the psychologists have been interested in revealing the pathological aspects of people’s attitudes and behaviors towards their bodies, which, at least in the long run, could put them at various risks. Consequently, they have also focused on possible interventions that could alleviate these negative consequences of suboptimal psychological experiences. The cultural studies, on the other hand, adopt a neutral outlook; their interest is mostly descriptive, relying in the highlight of culturally – fueled patterns structuring the personal experiences and projects to which the body is relevant. As remarked above, the notable exception in the cultural studies side – the feminist approach – shares with psychology this orientation towards the negative side of body – related experiences, as well as the focus on their external causes.

The plurality of perspectives and research choices made evident by our comparison between the two approaches can only be scientifically fertile. By moving beyond the rigid viewpoints on the body, which sometimes characterize the research endeavors in this field, scholars in both areas could enrich their grid of analysis by taking into account ideas from the other side. Thus, further social science investigations on the body could tackle all the relevant psycho-social layers: phenomenological, developmental, pathological, cultural, focusing both on the sources and on the purposes of body-related experiences and projects.

Acknowledgement: Work supported from the program POSDRU/89/1.5/S/61879.

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