Body Work in Health and Social Care

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Body Work in Health and Social Care

Critical Themes, New Agendas

Edited by

Julia Twigg, Carol Wolkowitz, Rachel Lara Cohen and Sarah Nettleton

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Afterword: Body work and the sociological tradition

Chris Shilling

Introduction

Body Work in Health and Social Care: Critical Themes, New Agendas is a welcome addition to the social scientific literature in the field of 'body studies', demonstrating as it does the importance of the body to one of the longest standing areas of sociological interest, work. By focusing on the inter-corporeal tensions, challenges, co-operations, pleasures, ambivalences and emotional exchanges associated with *bodies-working-on-bodies*, the chapters in this volume combine original empirical research with a theoretical sensitivity towards social, cultural and phenomenological issues relevant to our understanding of this type of labour. Such an accomplishment is particularly timely as the importance of body work to the economy appears to have grown alongside the expansion of the service sector. Depending on the definition of 'body work' or 'interactive body work' utilised, it is estimated that between 10 per cent and 30 per cent of all jobs in Britain alone now involve this type of activity (Wolkowitz 2006, Cohen 2008, McDowell 2009). Ranging from the caring and welfare services, to the commercialisation of domestic labour and the expansion of sex work, to the large growth in cosmetic surgery/procedures that has taken place over the last decade, body work is significant for the formal economy and the hidden economy.

In this context, the issues raised within *Body Work in Health and Social Care* are not just of academic concern, but deserve the attention of politicians and policy makers, front-line workers, and recipients of health, welfare and other body-related services. This judgment is justified by the briefest summary of several key problems covered by the contributors to this volume; problems that include the stratification of the body work sector in terms of its prestige and stigma (Raghuram *et al.*), the corporeal conditions delimiting the temporal, spatial and rational organisation of body work (Cohen, and England and Dyck), and the 'interaction order' of body work (Brown *et al.*). By exploring such subjects, this volume also analyses the difficulties of achieving control of one's own and other people's bodies during therapy/treatment (Cacchioni and Wolkowitz, Tarr, and Gale), how alterations in technology can block the effective deployment of habits that previously facilitated the effective operation of body-machine assemblages (Harris, and Måseide), and the processes involved in learning physical techniques capable of achieving effective working linkages with other body subjects (Wainwright).

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These studies have a refreshingly contemporary feel to them, and it is easy to view the area of body work in general as possessing only recent origins (Shilling 1993: 118). To do so would be a mistake, though, as the analyses within *Body Work in Health and Social Care* possess affinities with a wealth of classical explorations into the relationship between economic, social and cultural activity, on the one hand, and the broader contexts in which work occurs involving the shaping, socialising, training, treating, exciting, caring, maintaining and decorating of bodies, on the other. While current interest in contemporary forms of body work has added important insights to sociology and social policy, then, it is important that this research is not undertaken in the context of an amnesia regarding what has already been accomplished. Classical sociological contributions to body work may demand a wider definition of the subject than that employed in this volume, but they reinforce the social and cultural significance of bodies-working-on-bodies, illustrate the centrality of this phenomenon to the core concerns of the discipline, and highlight broader issues with which current studies on body work might engage. In the remainder of this brief Afterword, I want simply to illustrate these points by suggesting that the shaping and steering of the health, habits, emotions and other characteristics of individuals that occurs during body work is integrally related to issues that have been central to the sociological tradition.

Body work in sociology

Of most immediate relevance in assessing the significance of body work, perhaps, is the central theme that runs through Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, is developed in *The German Ideology*, and is explored empirically in the context of industrialisation within Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England*: embodied subjects produce *themselves* and *others* through their *labour*. Marx (1954: 173) explored how this 'setting in motion' of our 'arms and legs, heads and hands' could benefit the corporeal capacities and dispositions of ourselves and others, yet was most focused upon explicating how capitalist relations and forces of production damaged and alienated individuals from the creative potential of their own, and other people's, physical being, and turned body subjects into the appendages of machines (Marx 1975: 329–30, 1968: 41).

If Marx was the first figure now recognised widely as core to sociology to state the general importance of the mutually transformative relationship that exists between work and embodied subjects, it is also worth reminding ourselves of Durkheim's specific concern with the role of the body in the reproduction of societies, and Weber's explorations of the development of a *habitus* suited to rational capitalism. Both accounts highlight the importance of body work for central sociological issues.

Durkheim is renowned for his analyses of how societies are reproduced through collective assemblies, phases of social life that reinforce the idea and feeling of *belonging* to a moral order, but the significance of body work to this process is still being explicated (Shilling and Mellor 2011). Collective assemblies involve people congregating together in the presence of totemic representations of what they consider to be sacred; representations that stimulate intense, effervescent emotions, and assume their 'most important' form when *imprinted on* and *assimilated into* the flesh of participants (Durkheim 1995: 114, 218–22). The ritualised, inter-corporeal marking and socialising of body subjects that occur during these assemblies steer the emotional effervescence they provoke, and ensure that participants come to imagine and experience 'the society of which they are a part' (Durkheim 1995: 229). Collective life, in short, is reproduced through participants' *bodies*; bodies that

have been *worked upon* by, and are also intoxicated by, the ritual bodily actions of others (Shilling 2005).

Developed through an engagement with ethnographic materials on Aboriginal totemism, Durkheim's theory has been applied to contemporary nationalistic, sporting and other ceremonies (*e.g.* Mestrovic 1993), but it is Weber's (1991) analysis of the body work associated with the Protestant Ethic that provides us with the most productive theoretical account of how an *early modern* habitus came to be fitted for work within rational capitalism. Motivated by a search for signs of election in the fruits of their labour, and a religious ethos equating sensuality with sin, Protestantism sought to reform habits through an ascetic disciplining of body subjects: long hours of labour were validated as means of living righteously, diary keeping was promoted as a means of monitoring thoughts and actions, and regulations and laws were directed towards the control of personal life. As Weber (1991: 36) argues, the reformers sought to regulate 'the whole of conduct which penetrated to all depths of private and public life'. This Protestant attempt to promote disciplined body subjects was uneven (Roper 1994), but it does not diminish the importance of the gradual internalisation of new codes of behaviour and orientations to the body that occured in the early modern era (Mellor and Shilling 1997).

The contributions of classical writers such as Marx, Durkheim and Weber emanate from contrasting philosophical traditions, and are predicated upon opposing methodological assumptions. While their contributions remain generally focused upon the broad contexts in which body work occurs, they provide us with indications of its longstanding sociological importance. For those concerned with more finely grained analyses of how the economy, society and culture get translated into, and relate to, specific forms of body work, however, it is worth looking to other sources of sociological inspiration.

Body techniques, body pedagogics

Irrespective of their differences, Marx, Durkheim and Weber were interested in how bodies are 'worked upon' – in part by other body subjects – in varying social contexts; contexts that relate to the development of capitalist production, the constitution of collectivities, and the economic consequences of socio-religious movements. It is Marcel Mauss, though, who has was one of the most astute commentators on those specific processes whereby the external environments of human action get translated into the activities, postures, tensions, appearances and actions of embodied subjects.

Viewing the body as the individual's first and most natural object, and techniques as actions that are 'effective' within a particular inter-corporeal and natural environment, Mauss (1973: 70) employs the term 'techniques of the body' to identify '[t]he way in which from society to society' people 'know how to use their bodies'. Bodily techniques of working, walking, conversing, swimming, caring, nurturing, praying and even breathing are not natural or universal, but vary historically and cross-culturally. They involve social, biological and psychological components, and are acquired initially through a process of 'prestigious imitation' in which the child or adult copies 'actions which have succeeded and which he has seen successfully performed by people in whom he has confidence and who have authority over him' (Mauss 1973: 73). This imitation is complemented and reinforced, however, by the physical encouragement, instruction, steering and guidance that occurs during body work, translating imitation into incorporation (*e.g.* Lande 2007). The body work that occurs during infant socialisation, and the inculcation of young adults into working life, for example, involves physical corrections and discipline that constitute an 'education in composure', a means of assisting the control of emotions, and a way of allow-

ing 'a co-ordinated response of co-ordinated movements setting off in the direction of a chosen goal' (Mauss 1973: 86, see also Elias 2000).

Mauss's (1973) analysis of the techniques employed within forms of body work characteristic of a society is relevant to those questions of economics, culture and religion explored by the founding figures. Furthermore, despite his Durkheimian roots, Mauss's concern with how body techniques are manifest in *individual* body subjects, mediated by *social interaction*, and informed not only by social *norms* but by the technical efficiency with which they enable people to intervene in the world, makes his work relevant to a range of sociological methodologies. In terms of our concern with body work, then, Mauss allows us to understand how the manner in which individuals work on the bodies of others is not just of interpersonal significance. Instead, through the impact it has on the formation of behavioural habits and the habitus of embodied subjects, he demonstrates how body work also has implications for major structural issues within sociology and social policy. What Mauss argues is that body work involves an education, or a *pedagogics*, that directs people's activities along certain pathways, and away from others, establishing certain actions as habits while blocking the routinisation of others (Shilling and Mellor 2007). It is these physical habits that are key not only to the micro-processes involved in body work, but to the future of society, culture and the economy.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that Mauss's engagement with habits highlights a key theme within *Body Work in Health and Social Care*. Habits are modes of connection, unifying us with other people in particular ways and, in the case of body work, shaping people's embodied health, appearance, pleasures, pains and capacities in particular directions. Far from being neutral in relation to the broader issues central to the writings of Marx, Weber, Durkheim and other classical sociologists, they involve a 'special sensitiveness' to 'certain classes of stimuli', demanding 'certain kinds of activity', and steering our behaviour towards certain types of social, cultural and economic organisation, while also closing off other possibilities (James 1950: 114, Dewey 2002 [1922]: 125).

If the construction of habits through the work of bodies on bodies is a key contribution of *Body Work in Health and Social Care*, its analyses also usefully demonstrate the difficulties of acquiring these habits, and the obstacles individuals can confront in exercising them. Habits clash, and can become ineffective, and ossify as bodies age and decay, and as the technologies and the environments with which they connect change. Embodied action, and body work, is not confined to the deployment and inculcation of habits, but cycles through periods and stages of crisis and creativity in response to various factors (Shilling 2008). These changes are not just consequential for the individuals concerned, but have major implications for those issues raised by Marx, Weber, Durkheim and others whose writings enable us to connect through the subject of body work the minutae of individual action with the 'structural' issues of society, culture and the economy.

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