Exploring Body Work Practices: Bodies, Affect and Becoming

Julia Coffey
Youth Research Centre, University of Melbourne.

Abstract

This paper is drawn from a PhD research project exploring the body and contemporary body work practices. Understandings of gender and health are crucial to practices of body work and the broader experience of the ‘self’. Through a Deleuzian approach to bodies, this research focuses on how body work and bodies are understood and lived using concepts of affect and becoming. Through 22 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with men and women aged 18–33 in Melbourne, I explore the affective relations and embodiment of body work, and the ways that health discourses and gender influence their bodies and intersect with emerging and enduring inequalities. I argue that a Deleuzian approach to bodies may enable new, more complex explorations of the relations between bodies and society.

Introduction

The body and body ‘image’ of young people is a central concern in mainstream discourse. The increase in health, beauty and fitness industries is aligned with an increase in attention to the body, and ‘body image’ for both women and men. ‘Body work’ is defined as practices performed on one’s own body that connects to aesthetic modifications or maintenance of the body (Gimlin 2007). Body work practices in this study include all forms of exercise such as running, walking or yoga, dieting, lifting weights and extend to cosmetic surgery procedures. Even though men are now argued to be moving towards the ‘dubious equality’ as consumers of health, fitness and cosmetic products (Featherstone 1982), the idealised physical dimensions of the body are gendered in hegemonic ways (Connell 1995) which in turn ‘gender’ body work practices and link with traditional (unequal) gender structures. The idealised woman’s body in this context remains slender, whilst the idealised man’s body is toned and muscular (Dworkin & Wachs 2009). The gendered physicalities of these ‘ideal’ bodies relate to a range of underlying assumptions around men’s ‘natural’ physical strength and prowess, and women’s ‘natural daintiness’, as one participant in this project put it.

The relationship between the body and society has long been a key tension in sociology and feminist theory. Because ‘the body’ is central to this study, I argue that it is particularly crucial to look for ways to negotiate and move beyond the core dualism that frames the body; the mind/body dualism (see Grosz 1994). The mind/body dualism is often present in studies of the body. For example, body work practices have been conceptualised in sociology (Giddens 1991; Shilling 2003) as part of the ‘body project’ associated with the modern, Western individual’s ‘project’ of self-identity. Turner (1994)
and Budgeon (2003) however have argued that such conceptualisations of the body are disembodied. Further, approaches to the body which enact a separation between bodies as ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ (Coleman 2009) or between the ‘materiality’ of bodies and their ‘representation’ (Bray & Colebrook 1998) often unwittingly reinstate a dualistic approach to bodies (see for example studies by Crossley 2006, Grogan 2006). Consequently, I conceptualise body work practices as ‘processes’, rather than a ‘project’ because of the poststructural ontological understanding of bodies as processes that underpins this research. Through the concepts of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) the body can be rethought through as a process of connections, rather than an ‘object’ caught in dualisms (see Coleman 2009). The use of Deleuze and Guattari’s theoretical approach contributes to the emerging use of their concepts in empirical sociological work (see Potts 2004). In using these concepts to explore bodies and body work practices, I aim to contribute to developing non-dualistic, embodied approaches to address the material body in feminist sociological work.

**Aims, theory and methodology**

The challenge or aim of this research has been to find non-dualist, embodied approaches to studying the body empirically, whilst understanding and critiquing the social conditions which frame the bodies of the participants. Because binaries have haunted the body, much feminist work has sought alternative ways of understanding the body, and to highlight the ways that bodies are situated in culture rather than determined by it (Budgeon 2003, Davis 1995, Grosz 1994). Deleuzian theories of the body propose that the connections between bodies, images and the world take place in a series of flows, in which subject and object can no longer be understood as discrete elements or entities (Grosz 1994). This ongoing process is termed by Deleuze as becoming; bodies and body work practices can be understood as ‘nothing more or less’ than the relations between them (Fraser, Kemby & Lury 2005: 3).

Affect can be understood as ‘embodied sensations’; as simply the capacity to affect and be affected. Affects mediate action, or becomings (Deleuze 1988: 256). For this reason affect can be likened to agency, but avoids the problematic aspects inherent in the term, such as its oppositional usage and does not presume the human body as prior to subjectivity (Barad 2007). Using Deleuzian concepts is a way of understanding bodies as never passive or determined, focusing on the ways that relations between bodies and the world produce particular affects which influence what the body can do, and its possibilities for living. Exploring the social context of bodies with this approach enables an understanding of the current circumstances which condition or limit the range of possibilities available for living.

Through 22 in-depth semi-structured interviews with men and women aged 18 - 33 in Melbourne, Australia, I explored participants’ experiences of body work and broader understandings of health and gender. I recruited through asking personal contacts to forward electronic advertisements to their friends (not known to me) through Facebook and email, which enabled participants to self-select to be involved in this research.
I approached the interviews and analysis as an embodied, co-created process (see Sandelowski 2000). Other empirical work has shown that interviewing can be used as method for exploring affect, and in engaging with Deleuzian ontology (see St. Pierre 1997, Fox & Ward 2008). In analysis, the embodied complexities of my own experience in the interview were examined as much as possible. Rather than reflexively ‘capturing’ research subjects, analysis was approached as an exploration of the intra-active processes of the interview encounter, through which the participant and I both produced the ‘data’.

The bodily ideals prevalent in ‘healthism’ and consumer culture idealise white, middle class bodies (Dworkin & Wachs 2009); and many of the participants in this study could be considered part of this privileged, dominant classed and raced group. The sample in this study relates to the epistemology underpinning this thesis, and I use the data to illustrate theoretical arguments. I will now discuss participants’ understandings and experiences of body work practices using Deleuzian concepts of ‘affect’ and becoming to explore two key themes: gender and health.

**Gender, body work and becoming**

Body work practices of participants were largely shaped around what can be termed ‘hegemonic gender ideals’ (cf. Connell 1995) related to gendered physicalities. However, the meanings and experiences of gender and bodies were described in very complex ways. Most participants explained that ‘ideal’ male bodies are muscular, requiring body work practices of lifting weights; and ‘ideal’ ‘female bodies are ‘skinny’ or slender, requiring body work practices of dietary control and exercise (Dworkin & Wachs 2009). Although many participants did not endorse these ‘ideal’ figures, or do the sorts of body work required to ‘achieve’ these bodies, all identified them as the mainstream ideal. Women were understood as subject to more body ‘pressure’. Interestingly however, most of the men in this study also described feeling body ‘pressure’, but did not connect this broadly to the experience of men and masculinity (Coffey 2012). Kate and Jason used same phrasing to describe how others’ bodies affect them:

*There are such a lot of expectations on women nowadays, in all the magazines that come out or fashion television...I get caught up in ‘this is how I’m supposed to look, this is what I’m supposed to be’. (Kate, 25, administrative assistant / nanny)*

*When we see those [football] players running around it puts, kind of, an image in your mind, like ‘oh that’s what I need to look like, that’s how I need to be’, and so you go to the gym... (Jason, 22, accountant and amateur footballer)*

Gender ideals affect Kate’s and Jason’s bodies and body work practices. They can be understood as experiencing particularly intensive affects in their relations with the ‘gendered ideal’ bodies they see, in magazines and on television for Kate, and on the football field for Jason. The term ‘becoming’ can be used even when participants do not ‘transcend’ dominant discourses or structures. Kate’s and Jason’s encounters with ‘ideal’
men’s and women’s bodies involve a ‘repetition’ of gender structures, in wanting to possess the physical differences of these bodies. Becoming does not mean people can voluntarily ‘become’ whatever they want, and certain becomings are repeated through the relations and affects that produce them (Coleman 2009). Becomings can often involve the ordinary and dominant conditions being repeated and remaining the same. Repetition is not the same as reproduction however. Becoming is immanent – ‘there is nothing other than the flow of becoming’ (Colebrook 2002: 125); even when dominant (binary) conditions of gender, for example, are repeated. What bodies do, and the relations and affects with which they are engaged, is most important from this standpoint (see Braidotti 2011).

The complexities and ambiguities in Jason’s language in particular extend the traditionally gendered understanding of men as unconcerned about their appearance. Featherstone (2010) argues that the intensified focus on men in advertising and consumer culture is altering this aspect of masculinity (see also Bell & McNaughton 2006 and Coffey 2011, 2012). Working on the appearance of his body is something Jason says he ‘admits’ doing, suggesting tension between how he experiences his body and how he understands gendered bodies more broadly. The relations and affects between bodies, images and gender are complex (see Coffey 2012), and these concepts can provide new tools to understand these ambivalent, less coherent experiences of the embodied self (Coleman 2009: 214).

**Health, body work and affect**

Discourses of health which link health to appearance were prevalent in participants’ understandings of bodies. The advertising slogan ‘look good, feel good’ and other neoliberal understandings of the self in consumer culture inform this (Featherstone 2010, Crawford 2006). Health is discussed by participants in varying ways: as a set of ideas, linked to morals and individual responsibility (when Kate says ‘I don’t feel as healthy as I should’); as a feeling (related to affect and the embodied sensations linked to exercise); as related to identity and the experience of the self (‘I just want to feel healthy so that I feel happy’ as Paul says) and as linked to image and appearance (Victoria’s exercise helps her to maintain a ‘healthy shape’).

The embodied experiences associated with health can be understood through the concept of affect. According to Deleuze (1988), what we are capable of is directly related to embodied sensation (affect), and it is the relations of affect that produce a body’s capacities (Coleman 2009). To affect and be affected is, for Deleuze, becoming. The following examples illustrate how affect and embodied sensations are involved in participants’ experiences of body work.

*After a yoga class I walk out feeling more limber, and just healthier, generally happier, because blood and oxygen has gone to all parts of my body, my muscles are all warmed up, I’m walking straighter, I have less sore joints and whatever it is...I sleep better. It’s a*
general psychological and physical improvement, all over. (Paul, 31, sound and film editor)

Paul’s body ‘feels better’ after yoga because of the kinesthetic elements of the blood oxygenating his organs and warming his muscles, making him feel healthier and thus ‘happier’. Feeling ‘better’ is directly related to the bodily sensations associated with the specific practices of stretching and breathing involved in yoga. These ‘health’ sensations are crucial not only in how the body feels related to those practices, but more broadly affect participants’ sense of self.

Similar to Paul, Steph imagines that if she was fitter, she would be happier.

*I wouldn’t get fit so that I could show off my body, I’d get fit so that I could be happy.* (Steph, 21, waitress)

Gillian too describes that body work (through exercise) ‘liberates’ her from ‘feeling bad’ about herself.

*When I’m doing yoga or jogging, it’s my way of liberating myself, instead of feeling sad about myself because… I feel attractive if I’m in a fit state… I guess that’s my way of liberating myself from that constant battle in my head, where you feel bad about yourself. Because as long as I’m fit and at a healthy weight, a decent weight… I don’t feel that.* (Gillian, 31, waitress and make-up artist)

This situation is precarious however, as Gillian’s positive sense of self and identity hinge on her body work practices. Gillian’s body work practices, including a strict regulation of what she eats after work, doing yoga and jogging affect her body and what she can (or cannot) do. Whilst these practices make her ‘feel better’, the affects related to these body work practices are limited. Where body work practices such as these are framed as her only way of freeing herself from ‘feeling bad’, other possibilities for experiencing and living her body are not immediately available.

**Body work, image and affect**

Paul and Steph imagine that doing body work to be ‘fitter’ will make them ‘happier’. Gillian, however, shows that this process is fraught. The affective experience of the body, involving the connections between (gendered) ‘appearance’ and feelings of ‘health’ can be understood as a complex process involving the affects and relations between bodies and other assemblages as impacting how they feel and what they can do. Others, like Gillian, who classify themselves as ‘fit’, emphasise the importance of their body work for their experience of the self. The significant work involved in maintaining an appearance that makes them ‘feel good’ about their bodies, however, perpetuates their body work, and closes down possibilities for living their bodies in other less regulated ways.
I can’t bring myself to go for more than 2 days without going to the gym. I’ve sort of built up a reputation for being a big strong guy, and even if I get on the scales and weigh myself and I’ll still be the same weight, I feel if I don’t go for a few days, I feel not as strong, not as confident. I have to keep going and doing it. I’m 32 and I wonder how long I can keep that up for. (Ben, 32, sales representative)

I might think I look the same but then I weigh myself and look at myself again in the mirror I’m like ‘oh no I look really big’, if I’m heavier. It’s like your mind is playing tricks on you a little bit. (Isabelle, 24, beauty therapist)

Like Ben and Isabelle, Adam and Jason similarly describe ‘looking different’ in the mirror if they have not trained for 2 or 3 days – ‘it’s like your mind is playing tricks on you’. Featherstone (2010: 197) argues that in consumer culture, which is obsessed with bodies, ‘images do complex work’, such as Ben, Jason and Isabelle’s mirror images of their own bodies. Featherstone insists that images are not merely visual, and are felt as a sense of energy, force or intensity: they are affective (2010: 199). The affective intensities associated with the body in the mirror for women and men in these examples are similar, despite being moderated by gendered dimensions of physicality. The intensity of the affects associated with the practices of body work connect the experiences of Isabelle, Ben, Jason and Gillian particularly. Like Gillian’s slimming body work practices, the affects related to Ben’s weights training limit the range of possibilities for living his body. In these examples, physically hegemonic gender ideals frame their body work and bodies. Because gendered ideals of men’s and women’s bodies are narrow, their possibilities for their bodies and body work are restricted.

Expanding possibilities for becoming requires ‘opening up to the many rather than the few’ (Fox 2002). For Gillian and Ben however, the affective relations associated with their bodies and body work practices are intensified, rather than multiplied. This perspective enables an understanding of body work practices as not intrinsically good or bad; rather it depends on whether life is restricted or maximised through their relations. The more a body is opened to difference and multiple possibilities for affect, the more force it has; the more it can do (Fox 2002). Gender, in these examples, can be understood as limiting how Ben’s and Gillian’s bodies may be lived, since their body work practices must be continually repeated. However, a Deleuzian perspective understands that this process is not foreclosed; the relations between bodies and the world are ongoing, as is the possibility of ‘becoming otherwise’ as relations and affects modulate. As Fox argues, this may seem a difficult conclusion to draw, since ‘opening up to difference’ may not be something that can be achieved independently: ‘we may need all the help we can get’ (2002: 359). Deleuze’s work is thus inherently political, and the implications extend beyond the academy to social policy and the politics of welfare (Fox 2002).

Conclusion

Through a Deleuzian approach which entails examining the relations and affects between bodies and the world, a concern for what bodies can (and cannot) do – rather than what
bodies are – is central. This approach can be aligned with advancing feminist methodological commitments to embodying theory and creating a ‘less comfortable social science’ that tries to be accountable to complexity (St. Pierre & Pillow 2000: 6). Deleuze’s concepts can be used in response to a range of problems in sociological and feminist empirical work; including the negotiation of dualisms such as mind/body (Grosz 1994), representation/materiality (see Bray & Colebrook 1998) and structure/agency (see Barad 2007).

The broader study from which these examples are drawn focuses primarily on gender as an embodied categorisation of bodies and the context of consumer culture and ‘health’ discourses. Gender and health can also be understood through the concept of affect; as having affective consequences. The particularly intensive body work regimes, such as in Isabelle, Ben, Jason and Gillian’s examples, connect them. This could be seen as complicating understandings of the embodied experience of gender; enabling a more complex analysis of the embodied, affective experience of bodies. Race, class, sexuality, ability and other forces which structure inequality are also crucial components that bodies connect with through affective relations, and future research could address these areas. To study becoming and affect is to be concerned with the multitude of connections (psychological, emotional and physical) that a body has (Fox 2002). A Deleuzian approach to bodies in context enables new, complex understandings of the relations between bodies and society, and how bodies may be lived differently, and more equally.

**Key words:** Bodies, body work, gender, Deleuze, health.

**References**


