Theorizing Subjectivity and Feminine Embodiment: Feminist Approaches and Debates

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Contents

Abstract

This chapter traces the appearance of the body as it has manifest in feminist studies of young women. In particular, the discussion focuses on a shift in emphasis away from young women as passive victims of various forms of cultural determinism to approaches which seek to complicate the relationship of gendered bodies and regimes of signification. These approaches have often radically reconceptualized the role of the body in young women's practice of self-identity and the social processes which contribute to young women's subjectivation by emphasizing the active and processual nature of the self-body relation. Such approaches challenge many key aspects of earlier feminist analyses and critiques. Debates concerning the impact of this reconceptualization are assessed, and implications for the study of young femininities are discussed.

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J. Wyn, H. Cahill (eds.), *Handbook of Children and Youth Studies*, DOI 10.1007/978-981-4451-15-4_2

Introduction

Feminist theory has been a central force in establishing that the body is a site where social relations find their expression. Whether by challenging biological essentialism, critiquing the gender binary, situating the practice of ethics, theorizing the maternal, questioning heterosexuality, examining representational practices in literature and art, or interrogating the construction of racialized and classed differences as they intersect with gender feminism has brought the body into focus as a key feature of the social. Brook (1999, p. 2) argues, "all feminist thinking might be described as an engagement of one sort or another with what it means to be, and to be perceived to be, a female body." The material body perceived as the foundation for sexual difference has long served as the ground for justifying gender as a relation of naturalized difference and inequality. The centrality of the body to feminist theory, however, is precisely because "it offers no such 'natural' foundation for our pervasive cultural assumptions about femininity" (Conboy et al. 1997, p. 1).

Feminist theorizations of the body engage in a wide range of issues and proceed on the basis of varying approaches and different disciplinary traditions. They hold in common, however, the aim of challenging representations of women's bodies in essentialized, devalued, and negated terms. Beginning with the establishment of the transcendental gendered subject of western metaphysics and ending with contemporary positions which seek to establish an alternative ontological grounding for comprehending the body, this chapter will examine how feminist theory has theorized the gendered body as a site where gender is socially produced. These latter approaches focus on the active, continuous, and irreducible nature of the self-body relation and challenge many key aspects of earlier feminist critiques particularly those which emphasize the body as a site of constraint, disorder, and alienation at the expense of exploring the body as a site of possibility and transformation. Studies of young women which shift emphasis away from the positioning of young women as passive victims subject to various forms of cultural determinism to a more complex theorization of the relationships between gendered bodies, regimes of signification, and practices of self-identity will illustrate how wider feminist debates have been applied in youth studies. Before considering these developments, the significance of the body for the development of feminist critique will be examined. This discussion provides insights into how and why the body has been established as a key problem for feminist thought and practice.

The Body Problematic

In the seventeenth century, a conceptual demarcation between subjectivity and matter was defined by a Cartesian dualism which privileged thinking as necessarily prior to being in the world. To be "human," one had to conform to the definition of a transcendent subject whose constitution required conquering the flesh and bodily passions. To think rationally was to be self-defining and self-sufficient.

The gendered implications of such a formulation are readily apparent in this binary division upon which modern political thought was founded.

> Woman in fact never makes the transition from the mythical 'state of nature' to the body politic. She *becomes* nature. She is necessary to the functioning of cultural life, she is the very ground which makes cultural life possible, yet she is not part of it...These divisions are conceptually and historically sexualised, with woman remaining mere nature, mere body, reproducing in the private, familial sphere. These associations are viewed as having their ground in woman's ontology. (Gatens 1996, p. 51)

This gendered constitution of the public and the private established a core problem for feminist theory – the need to challenge the exclusion of the body as the foundation of western metaphysics. This was deemed necessary if women were to gain access to the status of subject. The possibilities for theorizing both feminine and masculine subjectivity have intrinsically been bound by this opposition. The regulatory force of gendered relations was further bolstered not only by aligning women's bodies with nature but by defining feminine corporeality a priori as anarchic and disordered. Bound to an irrational and infirm essence which determined their embodied nature, women were seen to be wholly inadequately equipped to operate within the public sphere – an imagined space constituted on the very exclusion of women's bodies. Crucially, the association of women with the body contrasts with men whose behaviors are underdetermined, who as self-governing subjects are free to construct their own futures according to the exercise of rational choice. In contrast, woman's

> nature has over-determined her behaviour, the limits of her intellectual endeavours, and the inevitabilities of her emotional journey through life. Whether she is construed as essentially immoral and irrational (a la Schopenhauer) or essentially kind and benevolent (a la Kant), she is always construed as an essential *something*... she is always the Object, a conglomeration of attributes to be predicted and controlled along with other natural phenomenon. (Alcoff 1995, pp. 434–5)

This brief account establishes the broad contours of a central problematic for feminist theory. The mind-body dualism is a structure which creates and then organizes sexual difference according to an exclusionary logic – a way of thinking that also underpins a range of other gendered binaries including culture-nature, reason-emotion, active-passive, subject-object, and so forth. A key binary which will serve as the focus of this discussion is the representation-materiality binary because the act of thinking, the preserve of rational men, is often critiqued by feminists as dependent upon the expulsion or repression of the material (maternal-feminine) body. Femininity is foremost a male construct – the product of patriarchal, phallocentric representational practices which make gendered bodies meaningful. By diagnosing this problem, feminist theory has sought to challenge the exclusionary logic of the binary which establishes femininity as masculinity's negated and inferior other. A number of questions lay at the heart of theorizing women's embodied subjectivity. What is the relationship between the material body and the systems through which it becomes meaningful? How might women's bodies become meaningful outside of the systems of thought which have heretofore

made them knowable as rational man's other? In the first part of this chapter, several key strategies will be explained and evaluated. In the second half, this general overview of feminist theory will be accompanied by a discussion of how key elements in feminist debates have played out in the study of young women's relationship to representations of femininity and body image.

Egalitarian Feminism

In setting out to deny gender inequality is justified on the basis of innate sexual/bodily difference, feminism pursues an agenda which fundamentally challenges the meanings attributed to the body and the role of embodiment in organizing social relations. Different strategies have been developed in this regard, each having to grapple with whether to argue that women are equally able to transcend embodiment as men are deemed able, or alternatively, to seek to retrieve the female body from patriarchal representations so "the sexual (and radical) specificity of bodies and subjectivities" may be revalued and women granted recognition for their difference (Grosz 1994, p. 14). Egalitarian feminism argues women, like men, are equally capable of transcending the constraints imposed by their biology to participate in society as men's equals. For de Beauvoir, this meant the body was something to be conquered in favor of giving oneself to the life of the mind (Brook 1999, p. 15). These perspectives do not deny embodied sex differences; some even hint of devaluing the female body, but maintain that the sexual specificity of the body does not determine women's capacity to participate fully in male-defined social spheres and the realm of masculine privilege. This interpretation of sexual difference upholds the separation of nature and culture and underpins a central debate within feminism – the problem of equality versus difference.

In social constructionist versions of egalitarian feminism, the biological body is approached not as an obstacle in need of overcoming but a "biological object whose representation and functioning is political" (Grosz 1994, p. 16). The use of this strategy marked a key point in the development of feminist thought in the mid-twentieth century. As Oakley (1985) argued, "sex" refers to the visible and functional biological differences of male and female bodies while "gender" operates as a sociocultural system of classification into "masculine" and "feminine." Oakley stated "the constancy of sex must be admitted, but so too must the variability of gender" thereby providing evidence of the social rather than the natural origins of gender roles (Oakley 1985, p. 16, cited in Delphy 1993, p. 3). Culture, rather than the material body became determinate in questions over the significance of sexual difference for "if men and women are always already cultured and gendered then it makes no sense to ask about any essential or natural basis for difference" (Colebrook 2000, p. 77). This strategy critically argues that the "raw material of socialization are fundamentally the same for both sexes: each has an analogous biological or natural potential which is unequally developed because the social roles imposed on the two sexes are not equivalent" (Grosz 1995, p. 51). The solution to the devaluation and negation of the feminine, therefore, is to

intervene in systems of representation which define women in negative or stereotypical ways and create more accurate or positive representations to change attitudes, beliefs, and values. The sex-gender binary retains the notion of a biological body that is natural and the mind which is social and ideological (Grosz 1994, p. 17). For some feminists, however, the call to remove biology from the production of gender difference was not taken up. This is expressed in cultural feminism and versions of corporeal feminism.

Cultural Feminism

Theorists of sexual difference such as Rich (1977), Griffin (1978), and Daly (1984) advocate for reclaiming the female body and celebrating women in the name of their essential embodied difference. These feminists promote a solution that centers on rediscovering female essence and bonding with other women (Alcoff 1995, p. 437). The historical denigration of the feminine *as body* and the accompanying elevation of disembodied masculine virtues such as rationality are challenged by reversing the value of each term in the mind-body binary. A female essence, rooted in biological difference (and in many cases the maternal body) which for its proximity to nature and life-giving potential, is promoted as a source of ethical superiority. Driven by male envy and need, patriarchy seeks to subjugate and colonize this creative and powerful essence. Valorizing women's bodies as the site of feminine energy not only naturalizes sexual difference but defines female specificity within a body that precedes social construction thus asserting a body which is authentically woman.

Corporeal Feminism

Versions of corporeal feminism also focus on the existence of a pre-representational body and share a "commitment to a notion of the fundamental, irreducible differences between the sexes," but instead of accepting universalizing categories, it avoids essentialism by acknowledging the differences between members of the same sex (Grosz 1994, p. 18). The main premises of this complex set of feminist theoretical positions include the following. Firstly, representation is "founded upon the negation of the originary maternal-pre-oedipal-preconscious" (Budgeon 2003, p. 41). Secondly, the product of this negation is a dominant representational economy, phallocentrism, in which corporeality, materiality, and the female body are radically anterior to thought. As a result, it is impossible to know the feminine because representation is always already masculine, founded upon the negation of the feminine. The solution is to develop a way of knowing that evades or is outside the dominant representational systems that require exclusion as the basis for their operation (Grosz 1994). In its specificity, sexual difference can be recast in autonomous terms – as "the positive reinscription of gynocentric body image – an image that would remain uncontaminated by the representational impulses of a

phallocentric representational economy" (Bray and Colebrook 1998, p. 39). This position despite its creative and nuanced arguments reacts against but does not dismantle Cartesian dualisms.

Poststructuralism

This anti-humanist "stance questions the idea that the body has a priori needs, desires or functions which determine the form of culture and politics" (Gatens 1996, pp. 51–2). Foucault posited that sociopolitical structures operate to create specific kinds of bodies constituted by particular needs and desires. The body is the primary site through which the power relations constitutive of the social realm are made visible. Both the outer surface of the body and its interiority are products of discursive inscription. Bodies are "intextuated, narrativized; simultaneously social codes, laws, norms and ideals become incarnated" (Grosz 1995, p. 35). Many feminist theorists implement a Foucauldian-inspired framework to examine how sexed bodies are products of discursive and disciplinary processes regulated by gendered regimes of truth (Bartky 1988; Bordo 1993). Foucault's theory of power allows analyses of gendered bodies which avoid essentialism or biologism and engage with the sex-gender distinction without having to rely on a "true" or "real" material body. The material (power) and the nonmaterial (knowledge) are brought together in a recursive relationship, and thereby the binary is blurred (McNay 1992, p. 28). However, the charge has often been made that this account offers a socially overdetermined theory of the body in which women's bodies are rendered docile (Bordo 1993).

Often criticized for imparting an overly linguistic account of gender and sex at the expense of engaging with the ontological status of materiality, Butler (1993) argues that the material is not a pre-representational ground but a discursive effect of representation which passes itself off as a grounding (Colebrook 2000, p. 77). Thus "we may seek to return to matter as prior to discourse to ground our claims about sexual difference only to discover that matter is fully sedimented with discourses on sex and sexuality that prefigure and constrain the uses to which that term can be put" (Butler 1993, p. 29). Sexed bodies, therefore, only appear as sexed through discourse, and the discourse of gender legitimates itself by positing sex as its ground (Colebrook 2000, p. 78). Butler's crucial contribution to the debates is her attempt to overcome the main problem of social constructionism – an overly determinist model "whereby the social unilaterally acts on the natural and invests it with its parameters and meanings" (Butler 1993, p. 4). However, "by arguing that matter, while not purely prediscursive, is still other than discursive, Butler sustains an opposition between discourse and some 'outside'" failing to escape the mind-body paradigm (Bray and Colebrook 1998, p. 43).

The unresolved problem that remains despite these varying strategic interventions is summed up precisely as a failure to elaborate analytical frameworks which transcend the fundamental binaries of western metaphysics. In feminist debates, "there is both an appeal to some body that would be more than a representational

type and a sense that the body is inescapably representational" (Bray and Colebrook 1998, p. 43). In short, feminist thought grapples with acknowledging the material body and its effects in ways that do not render it as a pre-representational surplus, a determining essence or a negated ground for the production of social relations.

An Ontological Reorientation

The task is to build a framework out of non-dualistic formulations. This involves questioning the ontological status of the body by rethinking difference in a way that does not produce a negated other because "as long as corporeality, materiality, and authentic sexual difference are understood as radically anterior to thought, or negated by representation, feminist critique will only be a reaction against dualism" (Bray and Colebrook 1998, p. 38). Reconceptualizing difference as *immanent* as a multiplicity of differing and irreducible forces in contrast to power as repressive and exclusionary is a key starting point (Grosz 1994, 1995). Once conceived as productive and multiple, a notion of difference which does not produce binary oppositions such as mind versus body may be deployed. Positive difference means identity is not the effect of a differentiating structure such as language but that existence itself is a field of **singularities** expressed through differing relations and effects, which then become the focus of evaluation (Bray and Colebrook 1998, p. 40).

Because it collapses the mind-body division, this conceptualization allows for non-mind-dependant analyses of the body which greatly facilitate feminist critique. Analyses of embodied subjectivity need not begin from some point beyond patriarchal or phallocentric thought but start with questions about how *specific bodily practices* contribute to creative self-formation (Bray and Colebrook 1998, p. 36). When bodies are interpreted as an effect of idealized representations and image consumption, they are reduced to one practice among the many which make up the "event" of the body. The tendency to reduce the body to meanings determined by representational practices relies upon cause and effect logic. Alternatively, when the body is understood in terms of its capacities, forces, intensities, and so forth, the question becomes "what can a body do?" The body is not conceptualized as an image with a meaning to be interpreted. Rather the focus is on the effects or capacities, the body has to connect and form *relations* with other bodies and the resultant increase in capacity to form further relations. This approach seeks to understand the body in terms of action and affect, not cause and effect (Buchanan 1997, p. 74).

Young Femininity: The "Disturbed" Body?

The dominant tradition in the study of young women's embodiment is strongly aligned with the feminist critique of women's bodies as the site where patriarchal social relations find their expression. Research has focused more specifically on

> how gender informs body image through the different fictions about women's and men's bodies embedded within wider ideological frameworks, the different fashions for women's and men's bodies communicated by formative socio-cultural agents, and the different biological and social functions served by women's and men's bodies that define their respective social roles and social value. (Calogero and Tylka 2010, p. 2)

While it is acknowledged that late modern capitalist consumer society increasingly problematizes the male body (Frost 2003; Gill et al. 2005; Hargreaves and Tiggemann 2006; Pope et al. 2000), these levels are seen to be greatly exceeded by those associated with feminine embodiment. For a variety of reasons, the achievement of a *positive* body image is held to be more difficult for young women. Studies of the disordered self-body relationship focus on interpersonal interactions in which young women are viewed and treated as a body, the circulation of media images which communicate normative definitions of the ideal body on a mass scale, and the role played by wider cultural prescriptions for appearance which intersect with gender to define class, ethnic, and racialized the dimensions of the idealized body (Calogero and Tylka 2010).

Body image has numerous dimensions including "bodily self-perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors" (Calogero and Tylka 2010, p. 1) and is "usually conceptualized as incorporating body size estimation, evaluation of body attractiveness and emotions associated with body shape and size" (Grogan 2006, p. 534). Although body image is a complex and multifaceted concept "the major focus of contemporary research has been on body shape and weight. Widespread dissatisfaction with these aspects of the body have been well documented in women from a number of countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia" (Tiggemann and Andrew 2012, p. 646). Unrealistically thin ideals are characteristic of Western societies (Frost 2005); however, weight dissatisfaction is also prevalent "even in cultures where traditional ideas of beauty have differed from the West and have not necessarily been about being slender" (see Dhillon and Dhawan 2011; Bardwell and Choudry 2000; Wassenaar et al. 2000). A recent, large-scale survey of body image ideals which takes into account 26 countries found very little difference in the degree of dissatisfaction women experience (Swami et al. 2010). Findings such as these have led many researchers to conclude that the experience of dissatisfaction with one's body has become a normative feature of female gender identity (Tiggemann and Miller 2010). It is the *young women* though who are seen to be most at risk of suffering the consequences of body image disorders (Liimakka 2008; Frost 2005; Wykes and Gunter 2005). Frost (2003, p. 56) notes "severe body alteration behaviours particularly effect young women. The peak age for eating disorders, self-harming behaviour and body dysmorphic disorder is 14–18 years, and all three of these conditions are more prevalent in female populations."

Over 30 years of research on body image has focused to an overwhelming extent on young women partly because the roots of this tradition are in clinical psychology and psychiatric work focused on eating disorders within that population (Grogan 2006, p. 524). In practice, dissatisfaction manifests beyond body weight issues and is experienced by both women and men across the life course. However, the legacy

of psychological body image research is a massive empirical and theoretical literature which regards adolescence as a period of body image trouble and risk for young women. As a developmental period, adolescence is characterized by levels of increased "self-awareness, self-consciousness, introspectiveness, and preoccupation with self-image," and a heightened awareness of bodily transformations which for young women, when compared to young men, moves them further away from the current societal ideal of thinness (Tiggemann and Miller 2010, p. 70). In Western culture, a woman is defined as a spectacle (Tseelson 1995). The incitement of women to value themselves in terms of appearance may be particularly acute for young women within late consumer capitalism because of the increased visibility of young femininity (McRobbie 2009) and an intensified form of address that stresses the importance of "doing appearance" (Frost 2003, p. 56).

Contemporary beauty ideals are reinforced and transmitted by several sociocultural influences including parents and peers (Tiggemann and Miller 2010), but arguably, the media has received the most critical attention to the extent that blaming the media for perpetuating unattainable models of femininity which cause young women to starve themselves "has almost become a popular truism" (Wykes and Gunter 2005, p. 3). In a review of existing evidence, Wykes and Gunter (2005, p. 216) highlight the view that the mass media significantly impacts young women's self-identity and self-worth. Media texts are dominated by a thin esthetic positively associated with sex, success, and happiness located within a quite traditional heterosexual framework. The objectification theory, for instance, states that the circulation of images of women's bodies in the mass media leads to the widespread and persistent sexual objectification of women (Fredickson and Roberts 1997). By internalizing these images as the norm, young women acquire a way of seeing "themselves in objectified terms, as an object to be looked at and evaluated on the basis of appearance" (Tiggemann and Andrew 2012, p. 647). Liimakka (2008, p. 143), for example, in her study of young women's body image, found many "have learned to look at themselves through the evaluating eyes of 'the other' even when there is no other to evaluate their bodies. They have themselves become the other, looking at their body from the outside, and critically evaluating it as an image of a woman." The result is significant dissatisfaction produced in the act of continuous self-monitoring intensified by the perpetual circulation of unrealistic ideals. The self that is bound up in self-objectification has "negative experiential consequences for women, most notably body-based shame and anxiety" (Tiggemann and Andrew (2012, p. 647) which manifests in a range of detrimental behaviors and emotional states including controlled and disordered eating patterns, self-surveillance and obsessive comparison of one's body to images, depression, and psychological distress (Dhillon and Dhawan 2011; Tiggemann and Andrew 2012).

Experimental body image research which has produced vast numbers of studies rests upon a view that "women's experience of their bodies is simply perceptual and cognitive, and that women's' difficult experiences of their bodies are located in the minds of individual women" (Blood 2005, p. 43). Body dysmorphic disorders

are explained as a problem of misperception – young women who are unhappy with their bodies are unable to accurately perceive what their "real" bodies look like. A link is often made between the consumption of media texts, the internalization of a thin ideal, and the expression of dissatisfaction. The media, it is posited, is a causal factor in this equation; however, an interest in moving beyond the claim that consuming representations *cause* eating disorders has led to alternative accounts that move away from a language of pathology, disorder, "false consciousness," and passive victimhood (Gill 2008).

Dissatisfaction with theoretical approaches which cast women as passive victims is reflected in approaches that firmly locate the body and women's subjectivities within a political and gendered analysis of the social realm. The repetitive and very narrowly defined media representations of women's bodies do not cause but *reinforce* already existing norms of femininity. Here, gender is understood in much more fluid terms as something which is continually being brought into being through women's active labor and engagement with behaviors such as dieting and cosmetic surgery. Far from being "pathological," these acts may reasonably be conceived as expressions of the sociocultural imperative for women to make themselves into particular kinds of embodied subjects which are rendered intelligible by norms of femininity. The norms which constitute femininity "are part of the technology of power – capitalist and patriarchal but also heterosexual, white and Western and are also part of subjective consciousness" (Wykes and Gunter 2005, p. 208). As Bordo (1993, p. 166) argues, normative femininity subjects women to constant regulation, transformation, and "improvement" via their pursuit of elusive ideals. This perspective challenges approaches that maintain the existence of a natural body overlaid by culture and acknowledges that power operates through technologies of selfhood (Blood 2005). Gill (2008, p. 437), for instance, argues that the language of objectification perhaps has less purchase "at a moment when far from being presented as passive objects of an assumed male gaze (some) women are increasingly presented as active, desiring heterosexual subjects?" What Gill and others reveal is that young women are positioned within femininity in contradictory ways and that power works through this construction of subjects "not through top-down imposition but through negotiation, mediation, resistance and articulation" (Gill 2008, p. 437).

These accounts highlight the active nature of self-creation as a central process in becoming a gendered subject and illustrate femininity is rarely reproduced in a straightforward or linear fashion (Markula 2003; Thorpe 2008). Foucault's assertion that resistance is a key dimension of power relations has, in particular, been central in shifting emphasis away from young women as cultural dupes of patriarchal and capitalist ideologies. Liimakka (2008, p. 132), for instance, has noted that "instead of seeing young women just as passive recipients of the images offered to them, many studies have begun to stress young women's agency in resisting, ridiculing or transforming the images." The young women in her study "in general seemed to pose contradictory opinions about whether media images of the ideal woman have an influence on them or not. Even the same person could express differing opinions about this during the flow of conversation"

(Liimakka 2008, p. 137). This research challenges assumptions often made about how the "objectified body" is lived and suggests it is possible for young women to, in some contexts, interrupt or make a "break" in the discourse of the female body as a spectacle or visual image.

Foucauldian approaches begin to blur the boundaries between representation and materiality (and related binaries) but ultimately the subject-object split is retained (Coleman 2008). Several theorists have pursued new approaches to young women's embodied identity by rejecting the fundamental premises of the body image model. Dissatisfaction with this binary logic and, in a sense, this model offers an incomplete understanding of gendered embodiment that has led to proposals for a new starting point for the study of young women's embodiment – one that rejects the separation of mind-body, subject-object, and representation-materiality (Budgeon 2003). These studies begin to illustrate new and useful insights into the complex understandings and experiences young women express when speaking about their embodied selves (Budgeon 2003; Coffey 2013; Coleman 2008, 2009).

Coleman (2008), for example, argues the oppositional mind-body binary underpinning the body image model implies the existence of a body prior to representation which serves as the object upon which cultural meanings are written via the consumption of images. The act of consumption determines what the body means and reduces the body to image. However, in her empirical research with young women, Coleman demonstrates that the photographic "capture" of the body is only partial or temporary. The young women she interviewed knowingly expressed feelings about those images and their bodies which exceeded that moment. When viewing a photo of themselves, they knew the body in the photograph was only one of the multiple other bodies they experienced outside the image. Coleman concludes the body is a process of becoming which is constantly transforming and experienced, understood, and lived in diverse ways. The body is never *just* the image in question; it is irreducible to any singular practice such as photography. Relations with images are one of many relations, or affects, through which the body becomes, but they are not determinant.

By deploying the Deleuzian concept of becoming, Coleman (2008) is able to move beyond a conceptualization of the social world as constituted by relatively stable and discrete forms of beings such as subjects-objects or images-bodies to one which emphasizes processes of movement. From this perspective, bodies are constituted through their multiple relations. The question Coleman poses is what does the body become through its relation with images? That relation is best evaluated by asking what capacities does that relation limit or extend. By asking this question "we can begin to explore how embodied selves are processes that give rise to new understandings, experiences and significances that operate beyond the effects of representational practices" (Budgeon 2003, p. 48). The young women in Budgeon's (2008) study, for example, did not talk about their consumption of fashion magazine imagery in isolation from a range of other practices through which they made further connections which allowed them to develop a fuller and more complex understanding of their consumption of fashion magazine images thereby illustrating that

reading images cannot be more than one event among many others. This multiplicity renders reading images an unstable and unpredictable connection.

Coffey also adopts this position in her analysis of the body work practices of young women and men because it provides a way to "reconceptualise femininity from a symptom, effect, or product of patriarchal culture into an intensity exerting its own force" (Markula 2003, p. 36 cited in Coffey 2013, p. 7). Like Coleman (2009, p. 142) who states that "gender is one of the ways in which the affective capacities of bodies become organized and produced," Coffey analyzes the multiple relations which the body connects and engages with, making body work not a discrete project but rather a process lived as a "series of practices of negotiations among many that are meaningful to the ways bodies are lived" and "connected with numerous social, cultural, and historical forces" (Coffey 2013, p. 7). She concludes that non-dualistic frameworks advance our knowledge of "what bodies are capable of rather than what bodies *are*, and what bodies may become rather than only the ways that certain bodies are constrained by "structures" such as gender" (Coffey 2013, p. 13).

Conclusion and Future Directions

The critique of gendered embodiment is at the core of feminist theory and practice. The diagnosis of how meanings associated with women's bodies have served to limit the social and political recognition of women as subjects constitutes an ongoing focus. This chapter has traced key moments in the development of feminist critiques of embodied subjectivity starting with the primary problematic of the mind-body binary established in the Cartesian philosophical tradition. Strategies for challenging the patriarchal construction of embodied femininity have varied from arguing for transcendence of the body to advocating for the celebration of women's unique embodied capacities to developing sophisticated accounts of how power works through the body in the production of gendered subjectivity to developing a starting point for understanding the mind and body in non-dualistic ways. The mind-body binary has generated a wide range of debates which have impacted on the study of young women where analyses have attempted to move beyond overly deterministic accounts of culture's effects which derive from positing the body as an object which is separate from the feminine subject.

By orienting the study of young women's embodied identities to a different starting point, these approaches help us to understand the complex *relational* nature of gendered subjectivity and in so doing opens up possibilities for the development of innovative studies of young people's embodiment. In particular, this paradigm is consistent with many developments in new childhood studies informed by sociocultural approaches which emphasize children's agency, their complex lived experiences, active negotiation of social relationships, and perceptive ways of knowing (James and Prout 1997; Mayall 2002). Children's bodies are the sites where these dynamics are located, but the richness of relations which constitute their bodies has yet to be fully engaged with and understood.

Cross-References

- ▶ Bodies In and Out of Place: Schooling and the Production of Gender Identities Through Embodied Experience
- ▶ Bodies: Corporeality and Embodiment in Childhood and Youth Studies
- ▶ Girls' Embodied Experiences of Media Images
- ▶ The Gendering and Sexualization of Young Women Through Sex Educational Practices and Discourses in Southern Africa
- ▶ The Promises of Empowered Girls

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