

Forum 7: Body and Identity

Michael Meuser, Committee for interdisciplinary Research in Men- and Gender Affairs, Cologne, Germany

Abstract:

Body and Identity: Gender-Sociological Perspectives

Bryan Turner describes the post-modern society as a "somatic society", in which identities to a great degree are founded on and expressed through the body. Keeping distance to the own body, typical for occidental civilisation, changes into what some observers call a "body-boom".

"Body matters" is the new device, but it matters differently for women and for men. The paper will focus on the gender-specific ways how men and women relate to their bodies. Traditionally this difference has two dimensions. First, corporeality is, in the western cultural discourse on the body, more associated with femininity than with masculinity. Second, the cultural body images and body norms are different for women and for men. Images of the female body focus on aesthetic appeal and attractiveness (for men), whereas physical strength characterizes male body images.

A central feature of post-modern or late-modern societies is that traditional boundaries are breaking off. Part of this process is the transformation of the gender order. This transformation affects the way how men and women relate to their bodies. Body images are changing. Formerly gender-exclusive body practices become accessible to members of the reverse gender. Two examples which show that these changes include new options as well as new risks: Women engage in boxing, men ask for cosmetic surgery. The rate of women who get a heart attack increases, just as the rate of men who suffer from eating disorders.

Concerning these developments the question is to pose whether the traditional typicalness of the gendered bodies is dissolving or whether gendered bodies are reproduced in a new shape.