

Leder
conceptualisation of
the absent body
sociology essay



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In order to examine sociological theories of the body we need to know what sociology is and what its interests are. Sociology therefore can be defined as “ the study of the social lives of humans, groups and societies”. Sociology’s main focus is of the social rules and processes that place humans in associations, groups, and institutions. (wordIQ. com, 2010) As can be seen with the definition through sociology’s development it has took a disembodied approach within its research. Traditional sociology has been seen to overlook the body and regarding it as merely as a way of gaining social control. Bodies were seen to lack social interest and when they were included in sociological research it was only the way that we externalise, objectify and internalise the institutes of society that was examined.

However the body is arguably central in all sociology studies and over the past thirty years there has been a growing interest in the study of the body. (Shilling, C, 1993) One of the most important sociological debates that have been investigated is that of the relationship between the body and self-identity. Due to a rise in consumer culture there has been a growing increase on the amount of attention that individuals dedicate to their bodies.

Consumer culture in the post-modern society that we now live in as placed emphasis on the “ healthy” body through the help of the media. Today people are faced with images of the ideal, healthy body that they are expected to have. The rise in the cosmetic industry, the plastic surgery industry and the fashion industry are all products of consumer culture. (Featherstone, M, et al, 1991)

Leder therefore proposes his theory of the dys-appearing body. “ Dys” is Greek prefix that suggests illness or a failure to function (dysfunctional).

However Leder uses his term dys-appearance when talking about the reappearance of the body. For Leder the body will remain in the “corporeal background” for as long as it functioning properly. When our bodies act in a way that is not normal to us then we will be removed from the social world and will enter the limited world that is our bodies. There are different reasons that this can happen and the most obvious is pain. If we suddenly experience extreme pain we will shift our focus from the task that we were engaged in and all our focus will be on where the pain is coming from and finding a way to stop it. Strong emotions such as sadness or excitement can also make our bodies dys-appear as can unexpected sensations. Examples that Leder provides are when adolescents enter puberty and have their first period, or when a boy’s voice breaks. Both of these situations will cause the body to dys-appear as a feeling of anxiety and a fear of the unknown as common in this sort of situation. (Shilling, C, 1993)

Dys-appearances can range from being acute or chronic, they can be threatening or motivating and they can also be social. Social dys-appearance is where the body re-appears as a result of self-consciousness that comes from social situations. A prime example of this is when a person experiences embarrassment. This could lead to the individual being unsure of themselves and will pull the body into the main focus of that individual. Social dys-appearance can be very problematic and can lead to illnesses such as eating disorders. If the person involved feels that their body is not what is socially classed as they “norm” they will try and fix this in order to return the body to the corporeal background. However this can be detrimental to their health if they go to extreme measures to achieve this. This can be seen in the rise

of eating disorders in young girls, particularly those that are bullied as they are constantly trying to remove focus from their bodies. (Shilling, C, 1993) (mirror-mirror. org, 2010)

Chris Shilling has an alternative view from Leder with regards to the body and self. Shilling argues that we see the body as a project which can be worked upon and that the body is central to our self-identity. This is the opposing to Leder who sees self-identity as being latent. Shilling agrees with Anthony Giddens and argued that as a result of “ high modernity” the body has become an object that can be gained through the increase of technologies and choices available to us. The body is open to the sensation that is fashion and that alone brings the body into great focus and allows for an extensive amount of choices to be made with regards to the body. Again this is a differing view point from Leder as according to him the main interest of the body is to return it to the background, whereas choices such as fashion put lots of focus on the body. (Featherstone, M, 2000) (Gimlin, D, 2006)

There are two main characteristics of high modernity that Giddens (1991) argues has impacted on the growing idea of the body as a project. Firstly is that there has been a decline in grand narratives such as religion and politics which has led to a rise in individualism. Secondly is that the body is another means in which social control can be exerted. Bodies were generally just accepted in the past, but now the body is examined in terms of shape, size, colour and many more factors. Late modernity has been responsible for the rise in means of which people work on and gain their ideal bodies. Examples of these means include, fashion, plastic surgery, diets and body care products. However these means may have negative effects and can lead to <https://assignbuster.com/leder-conceptualisation-of-the-absent-body-sociology-essay/>

problems with the body which in turn makes people focus even more attention on them. If Leder's theory is one-hundred per cent correct then people's unhappiness with their bodies would mean that the body would very rarely be in the background. Rather it could be argued that with the amount of attention and time and money that is spent on our bodies it is clear that they are very much at the forefront of our attention. (Giddens, 1991).

However other sociologists argue that despite the opportunities and choices that are now available, aspects such as class and culture can be a main factor in the decisions we make regarding our bodies. Bourdieu (1978) studied Shilling's theory of the body project in terms of class. He argued that those in the working class use their bodies as a tool and see them as a "means to an end", whereas those in the middle and upper classes see their bodies as an "end in itself" (Gimlin, D, 2006 p. 701). This is due to them having more opportunities to look after their bodies in comparison to those in the working class who use their bodies as a way of gaining capital. This again suggests that a lot of time is spent on (Gimlin, D, 2006).

Means of body management are largely available in today's modern world. We are inundated with new types of diets, fashions to follow, ways to wear our hair and many more. However the cosmetic surgery industry is one of the most extreme options in achieving body management. With regards to body management Leder would argue that it is purely a means of eliminating bodily disappearance. Whereas Shilling would argue that it is a way of presenting our self-identities and that they are no real reasons for it other than wanting to work on the body. (Gimlin, D, 2006)

According to feminist sociologists, plastic surgery is often seen as oppressive for women and those who engage in it are seen as being victims to the patriarchal ideology. Kathy Davis however conducted research in Holland looking at women who have had breast augmentations and argued that rather than being victims, women see plastic surgery as a means of gaining control over their bodies. Davis argued that surgery “ serves as an intervention of identity”. (Jefferys, S, 2005 p. 16) That is, it is a means of women creating an alternative sense of self. Davis found that even when surgery wasn't successful patients were still satisfied with the results. These points all relate to Shillings idea of the body as a project. These women feel that by constructing and changing their bodies they are gaining a moral imperative. In terms of Leder's theory Davis' research is also relevant. She argued that it allows for women to become embodied rather than feeling like they are constantly being objectified. By getting breast augmentations women were able to put their bodies back in to the background and avoid any unwanted attention that they were facing. For Leder plastic surgery is a means of reducing suffering that stems from appearances that are deemed unacceptable. (Jefferys, S, 2005) (Negrin, L, 2002)

Leder's theory of the absent body has faced many criticisms for other sociologists. Shilling offers three main criticisms to Leder's theory of the absent body. Firstly stating that while his theory of the body project emphasises the relevance of the body has to self-identity, Leder sees the body of being irrelevant to a person's sense of self-identity. Secondly Shilling argues that Leder underestimates the growing phenomena of the body as a project and the work that people put into their bodies. The third criticism

that Shilling proposes is that Leder ignores how social inequalities can influence people's experiences of embodiment. Leder has also faced criticism from Nettleton and Watson (1998) for the idea that the body is absent most of the time. This would therefore mean that there are limited amounts of time in which the body can be studied. However Leder recognises this and adds that there are many other time in the day which the body can dys-appear. For example when the body experiences hunger, thirst or tiredness. Leder also acknowledges that there are differing durations that disappearing can occur for. Leder recognises gender differences within his theory, arguing that women may experience more bodily dys-appearance than men. This can be the result of the social situations that women are exposed to and the pressure that is put on them to look a certain way.

(Gimlin, D, 2006)

Therefore in conclusion it can be argued that Leder's theory is accurate in certain aspects, such as the body being able to work successfully without us having any knowledge of it, or that in certain situations whether social situations or in moments of extreme pain or emotions the body does come to the very forefront of our attention and prohibits us from functioning in the tasks that we were previously engaged in. However it is arguably the centre of attention more frequently than what Leder would believe and Shillings theory therefore could be seen to be more fitting in modern day society. It is clear that everyday there is a certain amount of attention and time spent on the body. Whether is it only limited to the basics of having a shower, cleaning our teeth and brushing our hair everybody does it in order to be socially accepted. However there are many people who will take their bodily

appearance more seriously and in turn spend lots of time and money achieving the looks that they deem as being socially acceptable. They are therefore using their body as a project and this could also relate to Leder's theory as many people do this in order to fit in and feel comfortable, therefore keeping their body in the corporeal background. Therefore it can be seen that Leder's theory of the absent body and Shilling's theory are not mutually exclusive to each other.