

Teaching Feminist Wellness and Health Education in the Critical Classroom: Understanding Embodiment Using the Work of Feminist Philosophers

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Abstract

This paper highlights the importance of focusing on feminist philosophers who embrace notions of corporeality and visceral experience when teaching in the fields of both Health Science and Women's Studies. Understanding that canonical feminism and critical theory view studies of personal health as problematic amidst current racialized, gendered, and ableist norms, a feminist health teacher must unpack philosophical paradigms before being able to deliver truly audience-centered health messaging. Elizabeth Grosz and Luce Irigaray are two useful feminist philosophers for such an endeavor; this article highlights their primary relevant points. The central truth of embodiment - that it is both individually and socially constructed and has served historically as a site for oppression, means that a feminist study of physicality will always be complicated. Rather than rejecting the body or "using the master's tools" to distance ourselves from the corporeal in order to establish intellectual credibility, a forward-thinking feminist must find holistic ways to look at embodiment, linking mind, body, and spirit equal in importance.

Keywords: Feminist wellness; Health education; Critical classroom; Embodiment

Do you remember the first time you ran onto the soccer field? Do you remember experiencing glorious chills after a hilly run on a cold day? What about the first time you fell down hard off your bicycle? I remember these physical experiences putting me in touch with my body and making me feel like I really knew myself, and was proud of that version of subjectivity. The feeling was visceral and childish – it was joy.

Physicality has become a dirty word among many feminist scholars and fitness is considered a problematic concept in the world of Women's Studies. The truth is that health promotion in contemporary society can often be accused of working in diametric opposition to visceral, celebratory expressions of physicality. In this world, the body is a construct, a site of oppression and mandated experiences, with aesthetic expression seen as obedience to patriarchy. It is into this quagmire that Elizabeth Grosz wades to disrupt feminist notions of the body. Her text is aptly titled, *Volatile Bodies*, because such pursuits in feminist circles have long been unpopular. "Feminists, like philosophers, have tended to ignore the body or to place it in the position of being somehow

subordinate to and dependent for all that is interesting about it” (Grosz, p. 96, 1994).

A focus on the body as a lesser component of the self owes its erroneous assumption set to Descartes and humanist notions of mind/body duality. In this philosophy, the mind and intellect are elevated above the corporeal form. Traditionally, women were most closely associated with the natural and the physical, bound to their bodies and the physical realm by pregnancy and their natural cycles. Men endeavored to disconnect themselves from the base physical and pursue lofty inquiries; reason was characterized as a male attribute. In this triumph of dualistic thinking, men are masters of mind, culture, and masculinity. It is they who can use reason to master their passions, bodies, and objects of knowledge; unfortunately this positions women as mistresses of passion and emotion (Ramazanoglu, 2009).

This binary manifests itself in multiple arenas, but perhaps nowhere more noticeably than in the natural sciences, particularly the discourses of biology and medicine (Grosz, 1994). In the humanist-influenced natural sciences, the body becomes a target for essentialist thought. Feminists remain wary of discussions of subjectivity that attempt to link the body to socially-constituted experiences. In the face of this philosophy, Grosz argues that the body exerts influence even as it is influenced, and that being a body is something that we must come to accommodate psychically (Grosz, 1994). Grosz seems to advocate for embodied knowledge, even as she acknowledges the systems that corrupt notions of embodiment.

Grosz prefaces her analysis with a sincere acknowledgement of feminist theory’s historical resistance to focus on the physical. “ Women have been objectified and alienated as social subjects partly through the denigration and containment of the female body…patriarchal conceptions of the body have served to establish an identity for women in essentialist, ahistorical, or universalist terms” (Grosz, p. 121, 1994). Because of this historical reality, feminists often approach discussions of the body from a defensive standpoint.

Constantly feeling combative has held feminists back at times from embracing new critical theories or accepting feminism in all its forms. There is an acceptable, canonical type of feminist academic and there are unacceptable outsiders who refuse to stick to the script. In her chapter on feminist besiegement narratives in *Rethinking Women’s and Gender Studies*, Allison Piepmeier cogently argues, “the besiegement mindset becomes a tool that not only differentiates between the discipline and the outside world but that is used within the discipline to police its boundaries and ultimately hold it back from certain kinds of academic change” (2012). For embattled feminists, the acceptable model of a card-carrying critical theorist is cerebral and not stereotypically-sexual; physical self care and celebration of the body are hardly emphasized.

In fact, physical-focus is considered a throwback, a concession to patriarchal beauty norms, and the province of the failed feminist. Feminist scholarship to date has been critical of discussions of bodily subjectivity in that those discussions are often used as a way of disciplining the body and conforming to hetero-normative notions of attractiveness and slimness. According to Verbrugge, the female body is more than simply a body, but is actually a site where social codes and relationships of gender, race, sexuality, and class are rehearsed, enforced, and contested (2002). Acknowledging this, many feminists seek to demonstrate resistance

by disconnecting from that bodily site. Feminists have generally accepted the wisdom that dominant beauty ideals are destructive to women; in order to resist beauty myths, many feminists eschew self care through physical movement altogether, and call it political.

So often, a focus on the physical is linked to pursuit of an aesthetic, with no focus on empowerment and strength. The National Eating Disorder Association estimates that 10 million Americans suffer from some form of disordered eating. A typical feminist look at anorexia would label it as a pattern of dangerous, disordered behaviors due to internalized compliance desires with patriarchal slenderness standards. Grosz breaks from that pattern, and sees anorexia as a form of protest, a castigation of a social system that belittles female embodiment as buttresses to her argument. Lacan highlights the connection between mental comfort/harmony and physical distress, which Grosz takes a step farther, arguing that patriarchal social norms that disconnect women from their true physical selves are the source of mental disharmony, manifesting in physical distress like anorexic behaviors.

Grosz spends a great deal of time looking at phenomenological thinkers who engaged in a reassessment of the role of the physical in cognitive science and traditional psychoanalytic work. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the body as a primary site of knowing the world, a corrective to the long philosophical tradition of placing consciousness as the source of knowledge, was of particular interest. His central claim was that the body (the actual flesh) and that which it perceived (cognition and intellect) could not be disentangled from one another. He broke from humanist thought and this articulation of the primacy of embodiment led him away from phenomenology towards when he was to call the ontology of the flesh of the world.

The work of Luce Irigaray is particularly relevant in furthering Merleau-Ponty's direct ontological position. Physicality for women is a primary focus for Luce Irigaray's work. She argues that the historic association of women with matter and nature has been meant to keep them in a subordinate position. Irigaray critiques male phenomenological thinkers who may make contributions to a re-centering of the body, but adhere to old notions of the male representing the whole (Irigaray, 1974).

By associating the feminine with nature, philosophy has devalued the female subject position and sought to shore up nonexistent differences between the sexes. The rejection and exclusion of a female imaginary places women in a conundrum on the issue of physicality. She is in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, confined to the liminal spaces of dominant ideology (Irigaray, 1981). In a sense, Irigaray strives to reclaim the physical as valuable and as gender-neutral. Irigaray encourages women to ironically mock the notion that their physicality is errant or insubstantial on some level. By speaking logically about notions that women are illogical, or embracing physicality when it is demeaned or degraded by others, women combat harmful norms and create new spaces for all persons.

Tamsin Lorraine expands on Irigaray's work in her text, *Experiments in Visceral Philosophy*. She uses Irigaray's notion of the feminine other to construct a notion of embodied subjectivity (Lorraine, 1999). This embodied subject is a unified project, a socially significant, conceptual, corporeal self whose dynamic process is

always a result of the tension between soma and psyche (Lorraine, 1999). Lorraine joins the chorus of feminist challengers of the philosophical notion of a mind-body split, and reads Irigaray as calling for heightened awareness of this relationship.

The complex interaction between thought, emotion, and physicality has spawned a field of research known as psychoneuroimmunology, which works on empirically validating the interrelatedness of the human mind, body, and spirit. The power of emotion to affect the body's physiology is fascinating, and is no longer the sole province of esoteric Eastern medicine, as increased attention and emphasis is being placed on integrative medicine (Seaward, 2004). Grosz analyzes the work of neurologists who have delved into this arena, and applies their findings to larger notions of bodily understanding in the social and philosophical environment, citing the thoroughgoing community between psychical and organic processes (Grosz, 1994).

A person then, is keenly invested in the concept of their body as psychically and socially constructed, and this exerts physiological influence on that body. Cultivating awareness of social pressure and constructs is a key first step to expanding notions of embodiment. Grosz discusses the phenomenon of phantom limbs to highlight this point, which operate as a psychical attempt to reactivate a past body image in place of the present reality. She asks her readers to draw a corollary between patriarchal oppression and the body images held by women (Grosz, 1994).

The central truth of embodiment, that it is both individually and socially constructed, and has served historically as a site for oppression, means that a feminist study of physicality will always be complicated. Rather than rejecting the body or "using the master's tools" to distance ourselves from the corporeal in order to establish intellectual credibility, a forward-thinking feminist must find holistic ways to look at embodiment, linking mind, body, and spirit as of equal importance.

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