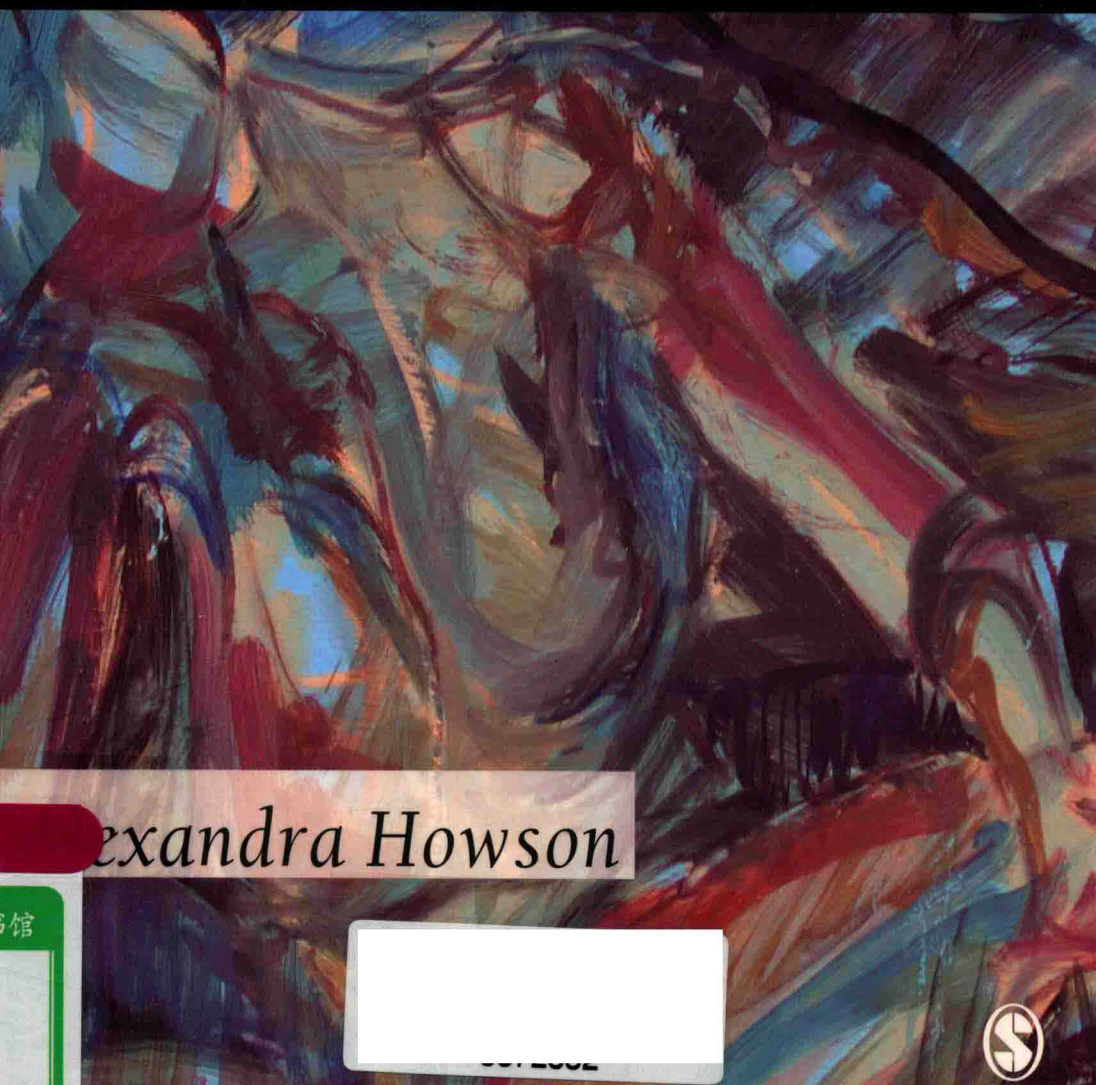


embodying gender



Alexandra Howson

图书馆



embodying gender

Alexandra Howson



SAGE Publications

London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi

© Alexandra Howson 2005

First published 2005

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, only with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers.



SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B-42 Panchsheel Enclave
Post Box 4109
New Delhi 100 017

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

ISBN 0-7619-5994-7
ISBN 0-7619-5995-5 (pbk)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2004099438

Printed on paper from sustainable resources
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Athenaeum Press, Gateshead

embodying gender

In memory of John A. Howson

Preface

A recent newspaper article (that I can remember reading but cannot remember where) told a story about some feminist academics in Italy organizing a conference on certain aspects of feminist theory and textual politics. The veteran American feminist activist and writer, Gloria Steinem, was invited as a speaker to the conference, whereupon she suggested that local feminist activists and representatives from women's groups also be invited to participate. The organizers apparently objected on the grounds that the women would not be familiar with the texts under consideration at the conference, to which Gloria Steinem replied: 'But they are the texts.' In my memory of the text (the newspaper article) I may have omitted key points or taken from it something that was not necessarily intended by the writer (who was, I think, a member of Southall Black Sisters). But what struck me was the counter-posing between materiality and text (as I saw it), between real women and the refusal to efface experience as a starting point for feminist politics, on the one hand, and, on the other, the way in which representations and representational practice have become the starting point for academic feminism; between the legacy of feminist activism embodied by Gloria Steinem and the centrality of the text to contemporary academic feminism, a centrality that may have the effect of distancing those who do not possess, or are not seen to possess, the cultural capital necessary to participate in textual politics and practice.

This counter-posing is nowhere more explicit, in my view, than in new feminist theories of the body that are fuelled by post-structuralist impulses and invest in deconstructive and psychoanalytic frameworks in order to 'think through the body' and develop accounts of sexual difference. Such theories, while ostensibly focused on the female body, are resolutely committed to Derridan and Lacanian notions of the centrality of the text in their epistemological assumptions and methodological practices. While new feminist theories of the body are increasingly taught across undergraduate courses in sociology, women's and cultural studies, these texts make for heavy reading and students typically seek to go beyond the text – often by returning to their own experience – in order to assess their value. What is lost or gained by either commitment to or repudiation of the text? What is lost or gained by suggesting that academic feminism needs to go beyond the text in order to re-establish a politics that includes attention to materiality without reducing female subjectivity to

the body? Materiality is precisely the dilemma for academic feminism as it moves towards strategies for embodying gender and accounting for sexual difference. The dilemma is mirrored by disciplines, such as sociology, that seek to gender the body, to explain not only the social significance of the human body in social life but also to account for the establishment and significance of difference in the social. *Embodying Gender* attempts to work through the dilemma of materiality in ways that neither privilege text nor repudiate experience as the basis of a pragmatic sociology and as a necessary struggle concept for academic feminism.

Acknowledgements

This book has taken too long to write, partly because during its period of gestation I combined part-time employment with raising daughters and partly because its aim and focus emerged more organically than perhaps I would have liked. I am, therefore, in the first instance, indebted to Karen Phillips at Sage who patiently insisted that I continue. There are also many other people without whom the manuscript would not have been completed. The idea for the book came from a seminar that Anne Witz and I organized at the University of Edinburgh in 1997 and both Anne's published work and her careful listening to early ideas about the book enabled me to think that it might be possible. Colleagues and friends assisted in this project by listening, feeding me, cheering me up and offering companionship, wine and humour. I am especially grateful to Marion and Mike Hepworth, Julie Brownlie, Pauline Padfield, Jan Webb, Alex Law, Gillian Rose and Carol Targett. David Inglis and Mary Holmes read and commented conscientiously on an early draft.

My family remain my principal source of delight and joy and have helped in myriad practical and emotionally supportive ways. I am grateful to the unstinting faith of Nancy and Will Howson, Ginny and Deb McWhorter, Maureen and Jim Watt and Jackie and Robert Fitzpatrick. My greatest gratitude goes to my husband Richard and daughters, Holly and Jodie, for putting up with a great deal of preoccupation on my part, providing software solutions and reminding me constantly of what really matters.

Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
Introduction	1
1 Locating the body in sociological thought	14
2 Academic feminism and the corporeal turn	44
3 Imag(in)ery, representations and subjectivity	73
4 Mirrors, lips and other metaphors: feminism, the body and psychoanalysis	99
5 Embodying gender/gendering the body	129
6 Conclusion	151
Bibliography	154
Index	174

Introduction

It is claimed that the discipline of sociology has led the way in 'bringing the body (back) in' (Frank, 1990) to social and political analysis. John O'Neill's *Five Bodies* and Bryan S. Turner's *The Body and Society* offered distinct explanations for the body's neglect within sociological (and other social scientific) scholarship and social theory and presented sustained analyses of perspectives and approaches that could serve the aim of developing a sociological understanding of the human body. The body is now a central and distinct arena of theoretical debate and empirical research within sociology and is increasingly the focus of interdisciplinary scholarship across cultural studies and feminist theory. However, while cultural studies are more likely to engage with sociology, feminist theory has been more disinclined to do so. Moreover, feminists and non-feminists conducting empirical research on the human body within disciplinary boundaries (for instance, within sociology) and working across such boundaries habitually cite the work of feminists who are *known as* theorists, such as Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, Moira Gatens and Luce Irigaray.

The theoretical insights produced by a relatively small group of women located within elite cultural Anglophone institutions has had immense impact on the direction and form of empirical research and more general scholarship concerning the body. Indeed, while there is now a considerable number of edited volumes that seek to bring together empirical feminist research on the body, e.g. judging by citation records, it would appear that feminist theories of the body are more likely to be accorded privilege within academic feminist communities. Yet empirical scholarship appears to have had little impact on the direction and form of feminist theories of the body, which *begin* from particular texts (Derrida's *On Grammatology*, Lacan's *Écrits*), interrogate and discuss those texts in meticulous and stylish detail and sustain a view of the body *as* text, despite claims to the contrary.

Embodying Gender thus explores a curious paradox. On the one hand, the development of the sociology of the body is informed by a commitment, however distinctly and variably interpreted, to the identification of the contexts, relations, practices and structures that shape human embodiment. While this scholarship has been variously accused of over-tending to the abstract, it no longer remains the case that sociological treatments of

the body are overly theoretical. There are now a number of studies from a range of perspectives available to the discipline that offer theoretically informed empirical investigations of various issues concerning the body, for instance in relation to disability (Dyck, 1996), reproduction (Martin, 1984), consumer culture (Featherstone, 1982), masculinity and femininity (Mansfield and McGinn, 1993), and health (Howson, 1999). These studies, many of which are engendered from within a feminist ethos, reflexively draw on theory and work through the implications of particular frameworks for making sense of the observations and data they generate. In particular, feminist empirical research typically has the challenge of engaging not only with the implications of social theory for addressing the body, but also with what Witz (2000) has termed new feminist theories of the body.

In contrast, new feminist theories of the body rarely engage with either feminist-inspired empirical scholarship or with sociological scholarship concerning the body. Hence, while sociologists routinely read and reflect on what feminist theorists have to say about the body, particularly feminists defined as theorists and who make a virtue of interdisciplinarity, feminist theorists seldom reflect on what sociologists have to say. This one-sided discourse has the effect of not only refusing the entry of empirical observations to the development of feminist theories, but also refuses the entry of feminist *sociological* theory to treatments of the body within both social and feminist theory. This state of affairs is not new, however, as social/sociological theory infrequently responds to feminist analyses.

This book begins from a conviction that embodiment lies at the heart of human experience and that both feminism and sociology have an interest in the integration of insights about feelings, emotion, sensations with insights about the impact and significance of rational thought, action and social structure on our lives. We all have bodies, but the trick that Western thought has played has been to allow men to think and live as though they did not have to attend to or labour over their bodies, to forget the body. Academic feminism, as an interdisciplinary endeavour, has tried to grapple with and explain this trick in ways that the social sciences and humanities have found useful, and in ways that increasingly seek to place the body at the centre of theory.

However, academic feminism's contribution to this endeavour has occurred in ways that also forget the body as an experienced material and sensible medium. To some extent, this trick is a corollary of the way in which those who do theory, do so in contexts that foster a sense of isolation, individualism and disembodiment from social relationships and the physical environment. The modern Western university can be a soulless institution that places emphasis on autonomous output rather than on collectively produced scholarship. Consequently, not only can the process and experience of producing theory be characterized by bleakness and a sense of separation from others, but also theory itself, in ways that forget

that the body is the basis and medium through which we forge personal and social relationships and experience the physical world. *Embodying Gender* is an attempt to work through that bleakness and contribute to academic feminism and to sociology by trying to keep the body in mind as the basis of living and active relations with others.

Though feminism has historically been exercised by the significance and importance of the particular – of women's unvoiced, invisible experiences – feminist theories of the body look increasingly to post-structuralist and psychoanalytic frameworks to establish a more generalized theory and politics of the particular. This produces a curious phenomenon: pursuit of the particular in feminism occurs via consideration of the abstract, for no conceptual framework can be more abstract than that informed by contemporary theoretical psychoanalysis. Indeed, I would argue that the body appears in much feminist theory as an ethereal presence, a fetishized concept that has become detached and totalizing for the interpretive communities it serves.

Thus, the book is concerned with the relation of body concepts to concepts of gender within sociology and feminism, and its aim is to trace the development, uses and articulation of such concepts. As some sociologists of the body have become increasingly exercised about addressing gender in their work, so feminists have considered the significance of the body for debates about gender and sexual difference. Yet sociologists and feminist theorists of the body rarely consult each other's work or address their concerns to each other. Instead, sociologists have attempted to gender the body and feminists have attempted to embody gender in relative isolation from each other. More recently, however, in considering ways to gender the body, male sociologists have turned to the work of feminist philosophers such as Elizabeth Grosz and Moira Gatens. Yet, feminist considerations of ways to embody gender largely look to continental philosophy and psychoanalysis rather than to feminist sociology. While there is sterling and erudite work here, the double marginalization of feminist sociology by sociologists and feminist theorists of the body needs some exploration. *Embodying Gender* traces the convergence of body concepts in feminism and at times in sociology on psychoanalytic concepts and deconstructive practices that have the potential to write the body out of the text. Writing the body back in points to the retrieval of feminist concepts informed by a sociological imagination that have the potential to contribute to both the process of embodying gender and gendering the body.

Localities, particularities and audiences

Following a tradition of reflexivity in sociology (Gouldner, 1970), recent work by key body sociologists (Williams and Bendelow, 1998) has explicitly identified the necessity of an 'embodied sociology'. This concept not

only insists on incorporating the lived body into substantive sociology but also invites the sociologist to write her own embodiment into that work in an effort to establish her relationship to the researched (which in this case is a body of theory). I have some reservations about how that might actually proceed and am aware of the difficulties of engaging in such a task (difficulties that are well documented in feminist geography, see Rose, 1997). Nonetheless, I share with these sociologists and with many feminists, the aspiration to situate my own practices of knowledge production and to situate that knowledge in ways that 'reanimate matter' (Gordon, 1994).

The book has been influenced by a number of things. Its starting point is not really an interest in the theoretical debates that have developed within both sociology and in feminism, although those debates necessarily frame my intellectual orientation to 'the body'. Rather, my starting point has been an abiding interest in the activities, practices and experiences of what some have come to term 'lived female embodiment', that is, the embodied experiences associated with, though not reduced to, being (a white, educated middle-class) female, and the labour required to maintain one's own and other bodies. Moreover, my experience attending to the bodies of others, as a nurse and as a mother of small children, offers a particular perspective on these labours. Such experiences necessarily involve close physical and sensuous proximity to the bodies of others in ways that cut against the particular challenges of the civilizing process (Elias, 1994) and the intriguing cerebral-ness that characterizes much academic life. The work of the nurse is at times intensely physical and material, involving acute sensory work (Lawler, 1991), and the proximity to and responsibility for the bodies of children typically push against the individualized detachment that informs a Westernized sensibility.

Therefore, the tactility of the bodies of others (albeit assigned meaning via disparate cultural, social and political frameworks) is something that is deeply implicated in my own position as both a sociologist and as a feminist. It is always already present in relations and contexts of care in ways that academic disciplines have been unable and/or reluctant to acknowledge until quite recently, no doubt because of its constitution as the focus for 'dirty work' (Lawton, 1998). That is, the body is ever present for me as the focus of self-discipline, management and care of both self and others. This orientation to the body has been reflected in my research on the body, gender and health (1999, 2001a, b, 2003; Howson and Inglis, 2001) which is informed both by C. Wright Mills' concept of the sociological imagination and Michel Foucault's insistence on seeing discourse as the conditions of existence that allow things to be said and done in any particular epoch. However, my readings of body theory have often made me pause to think about the ways in which bodies (my own and those of others) are objectified not only through embodied social practices but also

through the conceptual frameworks – also social practices – that seek to elucidate them.

A second influence on this book is inevitably my academic training in the discipline of sociology, which I view as a critical discipline (Mills, 1959) that grants epistemological privilege to the social in understanding and explaining the range of phenomena experienced by human beings. Mills has been an especially apposite influence because of his own philosophical commitment to a pragmatic approach that allows for the significance of personal experience in the sociological analysis of phenomena, personal involvement in the production of such analysis and a focus on practical possibilities in the present. Mills was interested in how social forces – the social origins of the thinker, the structure of the academic community and the requirements of a given social context – give rise to different intellectual styles. Though this book is neither a social analysis of the proponents and schools of body concepts nor a genealogical account of such concepts, nonetheless, my examination of body concepts and particularly their investment in text have pulled me in this direction. Pragmatism, while latterly damned by its critics as acquiescence to the prevailing social order, offers, according to Mills, a critical view of modern social life that begins from experience, rejects the idea of an overarching politics or theory and focuses on the 'practical, immediate and reformable'.

Dorothy Smith qualifies the power of the sociological imagination in her critique of the way the practice of sociology has disembodied its practitioners. Her work has attracted less attention from feminists than it ought, given her contribution to epistemological debates within Anglo-American feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. The importance of her thinking lies in her attempt to develop a specifically feminist sociology, which begins from the material experiences and locations of women, including those of the sociologist and offers a productive means of embodying gender and gendering the body. One suspects that for Smith, as for Mills, sociology loses its 'promise' and 'hope' as a critical discipline when it loses sight of the immediate experiences and issues concerning those on whom its gaze is turned and produces instead overarching programmatic statements. In this respect, Mills' – and Smith's – sociology resonates with a Foucauldian methodology that urges a detailed focus on practices and their location within the discourses that form 'a central axis of social formation and domination'. Consequently, the exploration of body concepts offered here can be seen as an account of concepts that are themselves the effects of particular kinds of academic practices and discourses.

The third main set of influences on this book is feminism. My sociological interests have been shaped by an interest in gender: in the range of differences and inequalities between men and women and among women (for critical reviews of the multifaceted meanings of gender, see Morgan, 1986; Hawkesworth, 1997), and I have pursued research and teaching

projects that seek to understand the relations and practices that give shape to women's lives and define, regulate and mediate bodily experiences. However, I see myself as a sociologist who is also a feminist rather than as an 'academic feminist'. By this I mean that while my political commitments might be broadly termed 'feminist' in ways that inform my research and teaching, my academic location is within the discipline of sociology. This location has two implications. The first is that while I have contributed to interdisciplinary projects, particularly in teaching, the contribution I bring is a sociologically inflected consideration of social phenomena. Second, my primary identification with an academic discipline rather than with feminism more broadly places me 'outside' the practices associated with the forms of textual politics on which new feminist theories of the body are based. This means that the critical approach to body concepts offered here is one developed from both the inside out and from the outside in.

This brings me to my final remark about my location and its bearing on the genesis and development of the book. Publishers like to know precisely how to pitch the books they commission and writers need to attend carefully to the issue of audience. It is commonplace to see written on book jackets the identities of those proposed audiences: students of sociology, women's studies, and so on. I hope this book will offer something of value for these communities of readers. However, academic books are also written to address scholars in a specified field or series of fields as a means of establishing the place of the writer in that field. I will later take up this issue as it applies to the current shape of the field of the body in feminism. My point for the moment is that the field I seek to address is less the field of feminist theory *per se*, which I view as synonymous with feminist philosophy and literary theory, than that of a feminism seeking to operate within the field of sociology as well as a sociology sensitive to corporeally inclined feminist issues.

The human body in the sociological field

The human body has emerged as an object of substantial cross-disciplinary scrutiny in the past two decades and has achieved sub-disciplinary status in many social science disciplines, including sociology, anthropology and cultural studies, but both the sociology of the body and feminist considerations of the body have shifted from their initial focus. Early sociological approaches to the body relied on both sociological and non-sociological theory because of a limited range of concepts available for specifically sociological explanations about the social significance of the human body. As Blaikie et al. (2003) argue, the sociology of the body was initially inspired by philosophical, historical and anthropological treatments of the body which have been subsequently developed in sociologically relevant

ways. Many introductory sociology texts now include a cursory section on the body in relation to issues of gender and sexuality; social theorists have addressed the implicit and explicit presence of the body in classical theory (Turner, 1996 [1984]; Shilling, 1993); phenomenologists and philosophers have examined the extent to which the body grounds experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962); and the legacy of Foucault continues to stimulate the scrutiny of practices of power that contribute to understandings of what the body is and how it is lived.

To some extent, the body represents a conceptual space through which to redefine the sociological project in ways that attempt to transcend natural/social paradigms (Shilling, 1993, 2003; Burkitt, 1999) and address recurring binaries of structure/agency, material/discourse, and object/subject. A key characteristic of this developing field has been a debate about whether the sociology of the body should be regarded as a sub-discipline or, more radically, whether interest in body matters offers a means of (re-)embodying the sociological project (Scott and Morgan, 1993; Bury, 1995). One might, if one were so post-structurally inclined, characterize the field of the body as a 'field of discursivity' in which there is no fixed centre and a range of competing meanings and signs.

In a spirit of contextualization and reflection, many authors have sought to explain the emergence of a sociological gaze upon the human body with reference to the social context in which sociology operates. It has become commonplace to argue that demographic change, feminism, and technological progress have fuelled sociological interest in the body and forced the discipline to consider the body as both object and subject (for instance, Turner, 1996 [1984]; Shilling, 2003; Lupton, 1994; Williams and Bendelow, 1998). The emergence then of 'somatic society' is one in which the major social and political problems of the time are expressed via the human body. These explanations for sociological interest in the body look outside the discipline and reinforce a view of sociology as responsive and reactive to social change, in keeping with its development as a revisionist discipline of inquiry which achieves its present by an ongoing assessment of the past (McCarthy, 1996: 106). Indeed, sociology is defined as a discipline by its ability to situate the ideas that it generates in a specific, living context and to develop a sure-footed reflexivity that enables its practitioners to draw attention to the part they play in their own process of inquiry. While the term reflexivity may generate multiple meanings (e.g. a feminist standpoint within sociology may define the idea of reflexivity rather more differently from sociologists of scientific knowledge), the point stands that a fundamental aspect of the disciplinary evolution of sociology has been a concern to reflect upon its means of knowledge making and its relation to the 'spirit of the times'.

However, perhaps too much emphasis is placed on explaining sociology's focus on the body by reference to external changes and develop-

ments. Part of the explanation for sociology's expanding interest in the human body lies within the development of sociology itself and its relation to other forms of disciplinary inquiry. Sociology has at times been accused of seeking out and colonizing new areas of inquiry in ways that may contribute to 'second-birthings' (Haraway, 1991) of the discipline. However, in doing so, new areas of inquiry may be unsatisfactorily homogenized and transformed into objects of analysis that are reified and stripped of their 'magic'. In the case of the human body, many sociologists have struggled to develop perspectives that do not objectify the body and this issue has shaped much of the field's development, in particular, concerns for the significance of bodily experience and lived embodiment.

Part of this concern has been prompted by sensitivity to feminism, queer and disability studies, yet the feminism to which social/sociological theories of the body appeal is typically associated with the textual practices of literary theory and philosophy rather than feminist sociologies of the body. Nonetheless, concerns about the female body within feminism have helped to shape the development of the sociology of the body at least to the extent that most social/sociological theories of the body acknowledge the significance of feminism as a social movement in making the body visible as a substantive issue for academic scrutiny. Moreover, sociologists who have been instrumental in developing body concepts have increasingly looked to feminism for solutions to conceptual problems associated with Cartesian dichotomies between mind/body, culture/nature, subject/object, self/other, and male/female. Yet, while many current sociological projects address themselves to the 'problem' of the body, in fact, their substantive focus is on the body in social theory.

The female body in the field of feminism

In contrast, feminism has long addressed issues concerning the female body via issues such as medicalization, reproduction, pornography and violence, though the female body has occupied an awkward presence within feminism. While feminist activism in the 1960s and 1970s more willingly engaged with the body at the level of experience and body politics (for instance, in relation to women's health politics, pornography, or sexual violence), Anglo-American academic feminism, until the 1980s, did not generally theorize the subordination of women through attention to the body. While certain dimensions of female embodiment were central to radical feminist debates about women's subordination, female embodiment as a whole was marginal (though often implicit) to academic feminism.

Though the literature generated by feminist activism concerned itself primarily with explaining and challenging the daily oppressions and injustices directed towards the female body, the body has only recently