



ANTHOLOGY ON BODY

Full Anthology Reader



[An anthology about the interface between culture, body and communication](#)

Considering the Body from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

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This article provides a general introduction to the interaction between culture and body through a broad range of historical and contemporary examples. The article addresses major cultural differences in the perception of the body, and how we may move towards a cross-cultural approach to understanding the body. Ultimately, the article seeks to demonstrate that when it comes to the body, notions of what is “natural” can change according to the cultural context.

Introduction

In his article "Body Rituals of the Nacirema," anthropologist Horace Miner explores the seemingly exotic and foreign body behaviors of the Nacirema, a people he describes as “magic-riden.” Miner gives a detailed presentation of their rituals and ceremonies, which involve the use of household shrines to ward off disease and regular visits to “holy-mouth-men”:

“...The Nacirema have an almost pathological horror of and fascination with the mouth, the condition of which is believed to have a supernatural influence on all social relationships. Were it not for the rituals of the mouth, they believe that their teeth would fall out, their gums bleed, their jaws shrink, their friends desert them, and their lovers reject them. They also believe that a strong relationship exists between oral and moral characteristics. For example, there is a ritual ablution of the mouth for children which is supposed to improve their moral fiber.

The daily body ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth-rite. Despite the fact that these people are so punctilious about care of the mouth, this rite involves a practice which strikes the uninitiated stranger as revolting. It was reported to me

that the ritual consists of inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth, along with certain magical powders, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalized series of gestures.

In addition to the private mouth-rite, the people seek out a holy-mouth-man once or twice a year. These practitioners have an impressive set of paraphernalia, consisting of a variety of augers, awls, probes, and prods...”

Horace Miner (1956)

It is only at the end of Miner’s article that we learn that the “Nacirema” are in fact 20th century Americans. In presenting an anthropological study of teeth brushing and dentist visits, which have been normalized in Western cultures, Miner shows how these behaviors are just as culturally influenced as the rituals and practices of the “remote tribes” that are typically the focus of such anthropological studies. No matter the culture, that which is considered normal or strange, forbidden or taboo is often relayed through the body. As sociologist Anthony Synnott illustrates in his book *The Body Social*, the body is both the symbol of the self and the society. He describes it as “something we have, yet also what we are, it is both subject and object at the

same time... The body is both an individual creation, physically and phenomenologically, and a cultural product; it is personal, and also state property” (Synnott 2).

This article proposes a discussion on how cultural norms are developed and expressed through the body. We affirm that culture is central in determining the ways in which the body is understood and acted upon. Through an exploration of practices and behaviors related to the body across cultures, we seek to reflect on the following questions:

- What are some of the major cultural differences in how the body is perceived and used?
- How are these differences influenced by dominant societal norms and how can these differences affect cross-cultural interactions?
- How can we move towards a cross-cultural approach to understanding the body?

Through a review of the scholarly literature on the body, we present four main themes of research that have appeared in theoretical discussions of the body: definitions of the body, the body across life stages, the body in action, and the regulation of the body. Moving beyond theory, we will give concrete examples from ethnographic studies on how perceptions of the body have differed across cultures and time periods. This presentation will include both Western and non-Western examples and will be centered on questioning taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding the body. Ultimately, we seek to explore how culture influences the ways in which the body is perceived, used and even defined.

Brief overview of the literature

Though the body serves a central role in communicating individual and cultural identities, it has often been neglected in social research. Seeking to go beyond biological and physiological explanations for human behavior, classical social theorists often turned their attention away from the role of the body in human interactions, focusing on more abstract themes such as class, nationality, and power (Turner 33). Theories on religious traditions, social customs and cultural beliefs thus gave pe-

ripheral or sometimes even no attention to the role of the body in the manifestation of these acts (ibid).

Starting in the 1970s however, the body became a central point of interest in the social sciences. This growing prominence of the body in scholarly literature is due to a variety of factors. The politicization of the body first rose to prominence as part of the feminist movement’s efforts to end exploitation of the female body. The AIDS crisis of the 1990s and ethical debates surrounding issues such as abortion and euthanasia have also contributed to the growing attention given to the body in the social sciences. Similarly, changing demographic factors related to aging and increasing ethnic diversity have played an important role in the development of research on the body. Consumer culture and the marketing of goods and services to maintain the body have sparked a growing interest in the “body as project” in a number of industrialized countries. Finally, the emphasis on technology in these societies and the ways in which this affects traditional notions of the body and the boundary between technology and the body also inform research on the body (Turner 1987: 228).

While limits of space make it impossible to give a detailed review of the existing scholarly literature on the body within the limits of this article⁶⁵, a number of scholars who have shaped research on the body are worth mentioning. French scholars have been particularly influential in the development of the sociology of the body. The notion of “physical capital” developed by Pierre Bourdieu, relates to the symbolic value of the body and how physical characteristics can be used to improve one’s social status (Bourdieu 1978: 832). The control of populations through the subjugation of bodies is a central theme in the research of Foucault (1979). Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty is known for his interest in everyday embodiment (1962), while sociologist David le Breton has written extensively on the sociology of the body, tracing its development and presenting new areas of research

⁶⁵Detailed literature reviews can be found in the texts of Lock, Turner (1997), Howson, and Morgan & Scott cited in the bibliography of this article.

(2002). Other notable French authors who have contributed to research on the body include Françoise Loux, Georges Vigarello, and Jean-Michel Berthelot among others.

In the English speaking world, British-Australian sociologist Bryan S. Turner has played a key role in the development of the sociology of the body during the 1980s and 1990s. His book *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory*, is considered a foundational work. Published in 1984, it was the first contemporary book to focus entirely on the body as a theme of research. Similarly, with his book *The Body and Social Theory*, British sociologist Chris Shilling provides a critical survey on research on the body, tackling such themes as health, sexuality, and diet. He presents the body as a “project,” which is transformed by its participation in society (Shilling 1993). Though the body has rarely been a central focus in classical sociology, it has appeared in important ways in the work of a number of notable scholars. One of German sociologist Georg Simmel’s most famous works is his essay “The Sociology of the Senses.” According to Simmel, the senses have a purpose that goes beyond their physiological usage. His description of the function of the eye illustrates this argument: “The eye has a uniquely sociological function...The eye of a person discloses his own soul when he seeks to uncover that of another” (Simmel 1921: 358). Similarly, Erving Goffman, who is famous for his research on social interaction, gave particular attention to the role of bodily performance in the presentation of self (Goffman 1959). In another classic work, *Balinese Character*, Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson present a photographic analysis of gestures and body movements based on field research conducted in Bali. Finally, British anthropologist Mary Douglas, who traces how concepts of “dirt” differ from culture to culture in her book *Purity and Danger*, has argued that the body is a symbol of the social structure (Douglas 1966).

Defining the body

One central theme in the scholarly literature on the body is what has come to be known as the “mind-body problem”. In modern Western philoso-

phy, the reflection on this dilemma can trace its origins to French philosopher René Descartes, whose famous dictum (“I think, therefore I am”) has become a fundamental principal of philosophy. According to *Cartesian dualism*, the mind and the body act as two distinct yet interacting entities. Monism, on the other hand, holds that it is possible to reduce the mind and the body to a single entity.

Questions of personhood and the self are central to any study of the body. As Hallam et al. note in the book *Beyond the Body: Death and Social Identity*: “Not all bodies are synonymous with self and not all selves have an embodied corporeal presence” (Hallam et al. 1999). Anthropologist Linda L. Layne argues that conceptions of personhood can be divided into individualistic conception and social/relational perceptions. In “structural-relational” personhood, the individual is defined by his social roles and responsibilities. Layne notes that this system is particularly present in Asia (Layne 273). Margaret Lock, describing the notion of personhood in Japan says: “Individuals... are conceptualized as residing at the center of a network of obligations, so that personhood is constructed out-of-mind, beyond body, in the space of ongoing human relationship” (Lock 169).

The Kanak of New Caledonia offer another example of a relational conception of personhood. While researching the Kanak, ethnologist Maurice Leenhardt discovered that the word *kamo*, which indicates humanity, is not only used to refer to human being. According to Leenhardt, depending on the context: “Animals, plants, and mythic beings have the same claim men have to being considered *kamo*, if circumstances cause them to assume a certain humanity” (Leenhardt 24). The division between humans and nature and even between the human body and its external environment are flexible for the Kanak. Leenhardt writes:

“The Melanesian is unaware that the body is an element which he himself possesses. For this reason, he finds it impossible to disengage it. He cannot externalize it from his natural, social and mythical environment. He cannot isolate it. He cannot see it as one of the elements of the individual”

(Leenhardt 22).

For the Kanak, who have a broad representation of what is human, the *kamois* able to undergo continual metamorphosis. Even a simple glance is enough to transform an animal into a human (ibid).

The Wari Indians of Rondônia, Brazil provide another example of how the social production of personhood is influenced by cultural models of the body. For the Wari, the body is a social creation (Conklin and Morgan 671). The Wari ascribe to a relational personhood in which it is defined as an interactive process rather than a fixed event that takes place at birth. For the Wari, personhood is created through social ties. The body plays a key role in this process, as it is the exchange of bodily fluids such as blood, sweat, and breast milk that is central in creating social ties. Thus, a non-Wari person can undergo a blood transformation (when a non-Wari woman conceives a baby with a Wari man, for example) and become fully Wari, even if she has not yet mastered the language. Conversely, Conklin and Morgan cite two recent cases of Wari women who, upon being impregnated by non-Wari men, were no longer considered Wari by their neighbors.

Most Western cultures are based on an individualistic perception of personhood. The functioning of the body is thought to be controlled from within through a natural, asocial, biological process. Western scientific explanations for the functioning of the body are not without cultural influence, however. In their article “The Limits of Biological Determinism,” Eleanor Miller and Carrie Yang Costello argue that the idea that “sex hormones” influence “masculine” and “feminine” behavior is grounded in cultural notions that assign gender traits to particular behaviors. Similarly, in her article “Egg and the Sperm,” anthropologist Emily Martin affirms that “scientific” discourse on the human body is culturally shaped.

She takes the example of the egg and the sperm to show how stereotypes on what is male and female inform scientific accounts of how biological processes work. Whereas the female body is said to undergo a process of “shedding” during menstruation, the male body is described as “producing” sperm in medical texts. This rhetoric, Martin argues, supports the notion of the male role as being active and forceful and the female being weak and wasteful. In revealing the cultural influence on a number of scientific descriptions, the above articles serve as an example of how truly blurred the line between biology and culture is in the “scientific” understandings of the body and its functions.

Conceptions of the body across stages of life

While all humans undergo the same biological life cycles, culture plays a major role in how these cycles are perceived and dealt with. In examining the stages of birth, childhood, mating, adulthood, aging and death, a number of societal differences can be observed.

Birth and babies

The position in which a woman gives birth, the actors involved in helping her deliver, and what takes place after birth can all differ between cultures. For example, in some cultures, the birthing process is considered to be “unclean” and thus women need to be isolated before, during and after childbirth for varying periods. In China for example, as part of a traditional custom known as “doing the month,” a woman who has recently given birth is confined to her home for one full month. There, she must follow a number of strict rules, including abstaining from washing and from all contact with water. She must also follow a “hot diet” to remedy the hot-cold imbalance believed to be caused by pregnancy (Pillsbury 1978).

Conversely, in her ethnographic research, Columbian anthropologist Virginia Gutierrez found that the Jara women of South America gave birth in a passageway or closed space that was fully visible to everyone around, including small children, as childbirth was considered to be a normal process of eve-

ryday life (Newton 16). While most Western women give birth while lying on their backs with the assistance of a medical doctor, in a transnational study on cultural difference in the birthing process, it was found that elderly women play a central role in assisting a new mother during childbirth in 58 out of 60 cultures (Newton 22). A cross-cultural survey of 76 non-European societies catalogued in the Human Relations Area files found kneeling to be the common birthing position in 21 cultures, followed by sitting in 19 cultures, squatting in 15 cultures, and standing in 5 cultures (Newton 23).

Childhood

After birth, the childhood experience continues to be shaped by cultural factors. Societies differ significantly when it comes to childcare practices and what is expected from children. In Japan, for example, physical contact is considered essential to child development and co-sleeping between children and care givers is common (Ben-Ari 1997). Co-sleeping is also practiced in Sweden, where children (especially girls) sleep with their parents until they are school-aged (Welles-Nyström 2005). In the United States, on the other hand, separate sleeping arrangements are standard.

During research for his now famous study on the inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands, anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski was shocked by the parenting behavior of Trobriand adults. In the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski explains:

"[Children] soon become emancipated from a parental tutelage which has never been very strict. Some of them obey their parents willingly, but this is entirely a matter of the personal character of both parties: there is no idea of a regular discipline, no system of domestic coercion...A simple command, implying the expectation of natural obedience, is never heard from parent to child in the Trobriands" (Malinowski 45).

If authoritarian parenting is eschewed by Trobriand Islanders, other societies may adopt vastly different approaches, with authoritarian parenting styles or corporal punishment being the norm. While the process of biological maturation is standard among

humans, cultural differences can vary concerning when one is socially considered an adult. Arranged child marriages, for example, though increasingly uncommon, particularly in urban areas, have existed in parts of southern Europe, India, China and Africa. For Hausa girls in Nigeria, for instance, marriage traditionally took place at the age of ten (Helman 6).

Adulthood and Mating

New behaviors, responsibilities and freedoms are acquired as children grow into adulthood. One area in which cultures tend to differ is in how and when young people are introduced to sexual activity. While the appearance and simulation of sexual activity at an extremely young age in the Trobriand Islands shocks most westerners, other cultures adopt an opposite approach. For example, during his fieldwork among the Kuna of the islands in the Panamanian Caribbean, anthropologist David B. Stout discovered that they sought to postpone all knowledge of the sex act and child birth as long as possible, preferably until the last stage of the marriage ceremony. Childbirth was referred to as "to catch the deer" and children were told that babies were found in the forest between deer horns or left on the beach by dolphins (Newton 12).

The age at which a person marries or enters into a relationship can vary as can the duration and nature of that relationship. While sexuality will be the subject of another chapter in this volume, it is worth noting how thoughts on the sexual attractiveness of different body parts and sexual behavior can differ from culture to culture. In their book *Patterns of Sexual Behavior*, Clelland S. Ford and Frank A. Beach detail the sexual behaviors of 191 different cultures. They found that breasts are only considered attractive in 13 cultures, while homosexuality is accepted in 49 of 76 cultures for which data was available.

Aging

Old age can be a time of extreme vulnerability or honor depending on the culture. In parts of South Asia and Africa, for example, most older women are widows and are among the poorest populations (Newton 11). On the other hand, in

some male-dominated cultures in which young women have very limited power, older women are able to acquire positions of importance and power that allow them to overcome the constraints usually placed on women.

The Tiwi, an indigenous people in Australia, offer one example of a culture where the elder members of the community have great power. According to anthropologist Jay Sokolovsky, male Tiwi elders wield great power:

“Regarded with a mixture of fear and reverence, the oldest males sit at the top of a generational pyramid, authoritatively dominating society by the exclusive possession of key cultural knowledge” (Sokolovsky 2009).

In other societies, respect for age may translate into a family-based system of care for the elderly.

Death

The concept of death cannot be separated from its biological implications, but a simply biological definition of death would be inadequate in most cultural contexts. The meaning and significance of death is also culturally defined. The variety of taboos surrounding contact with dead bodies and differences in funeral rituals and beliefs about what happens after one dies illustrate that this universal human experience can be interpreted in a number of ways. For the Tiwi, for example, death is not seen as an end, but as one step in a cyclical process. Ancestors are believed to regularly influence on the lives of the living and can be reborn in a future generation (ibid). In North America, the medical diagnosis of “brain dead,” in which a patient has lost all functioning in the brain, but may still have a heartbeat, has sparked ethical debates on the limits of personhood and biological life.

Concepts of Time

While the stages of birth, childhood, adulthood, and death have been used to describe experiences that are similar across cultures, it is important to note that not all cultures view time in the same way. Research on Ju/'hoansi communities in Botswana found that they did not keep track of

chronological age, practiced no age segregation, and did not mark or celebrate birthdays or anniversaries (Rosenberg 35). Concepts of time can also differ drastically on a day-to-day basis. The Western practice of sleeping in the same place every night for 7-8 hours without interruption is not universal. For some, it is rare to consolidate sleep into one long interval. The !Kung san of South Africa and Efe of Central Africa, for example, have no fixed times for sleeping and waking up and do so several times a day when it is most convenient (Worthman and Melby 2002).

Rituals and Rites

Despite possible differences in the perception of time and life stages, all cultures mark the moments and stages they consider to be important with a number of rituals and rites. French ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep was the first to note that rituals surrounding hallmark events differ only in detail from one culture to another. He developed this concept as a theory of socialization in his book *The Rites of Passage*:

“The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another...Transitions from group to group and from one social situation to the next are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence, so that a man’s life comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings: birth, social puberty [Van Gennep distinguishes between social and physiological puberty], marriage, fatherhood, advancement to the higher class, occupational specialization and death. For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined...Thus we encounter a wide degree of general similarity among ceremonies of birth, childhood, social puberty, betrothal, marriage, pregnancy, fatherhood, initiation into religious societies and funerals. In this respect, man’s life resembles nature, from which neither the individual nor the society stands independent (Van Gennep 3).

Besides his argument that rites of passage are relatively similar across cultures, what is interesting to

note in Van Gennep's description is the fact that he distinguishes between social and biological passages. Thus social birth and death do not necessarily correspond with their biological homologues.

The body in action

Techniques of the Body

Having examined cultural differences in how the body is defined and perceived across life stages, let us now turn our attention to the everyday life of the body. On a day-to-day basis, the body is the interface through which humans interact with their external environment. In his article "Techniques of the Body", sociologist Marcel Mauss presents a catalogue of how everyday activities such as sitting, sleeping, eating and even walking are governed by societal codes of conduct. "In every society, everyone knows and has to know and learn what he has to do in all conditions," Mauss argues (Mauss 85). Things as simple as the standard gait adapted when walking or the method used for cleaning the body can be shown to differ across cultures. While it is normal to sit at a table or use a fork to eat in some cultures, Mauss gives examples of societies where eating on a rug or using a different utensil or even one's hands is common. Mauss finds that within societies, techniques differ according to age and gender and that techniques are ingrained into individuals at a young age so that by the time they are adults, they seem natural.

In his book *Death and the Right hand*, Robert Hertz also examines a characteristic that has been taken as natural in most cultures: the predominance of the right hand over the left. Hertz questions if this tendency has cultural rather than just biological origins, evoking the commonly believed biological argument that we are right-handed because we are left-brained. Because the left hemisphere of the brain is usually larger and the major nerves of the brain are crossed, it thus controls the right side of the body. Hertz wonders if in fact the opposite could be true: we are left-brained because we are right-handed.

Though he ultimately concedes that the predisposition for right-handedness has biological origins,

Hertz notes a treatment of the "left" across cultures which goes beyond natural characteristics. He finds that "right" is not only contrasted with "left", but also with "wrong" and "immoral". Thus, we speak of "defending our rights" and the term "sinister," which originally just meant "left" gradually developed a more negative meaning. This contrast can be found across languages, from the French concept of *droit* to the word *tu'o* in the Berawan language of central Borneo. Hertz concludes that culture is in fact central to the dominance for the right hand. "If organic asymmetry had not existed, it would have had to be invented" he affirms.

Physical Appearance

The Muslim veil has been a source of great debate in contemporary cultural discourse. Some argue that it is a means of oppressing women. For others, it is a sign of religious devotion. Whatever it may mean for the women who wear it, the veil is imbued with cultural significance, illustrating to what level dress and the physical presentation of the body are communicators of cultural norms. As Linda B. Arthur explains: "Dress provides a window through which we might look into a culture, because it visually attests to the salient ideas, concepts and categories fundamental to that culture" (Arthur 7).

Dress and outer appearance can also serve as a space of resistance to cultural norms. In the book *Embodied Resistance: Challenging the Norms, Breaking the Rules*, the contributing authors analyze such acts of resistance, with examples ranging from overweight women who challenge dominant beauty norms in the West to transgender women negotiating heteronormative spaces. According to Rose Weitz, every action contains both resistance and accommodation to cultural norms. "At times, resistance is a clever and complicated dance of negotiation, and it is rarely a zero-sum game," she affirms (Weitz 2001). Resistance and accommodation can be practiced on the individual level, but also within sub or minority cultures.

Nonverbal Communication

Cultural differences are at the origin of a number of nonverbal communication problems. Just

as spoken language can differ from culture to culture, the use of gestures, touch and eye contact is culturally regulated. As linguist Walburga Von Raffler-Engel explains:

“Nonverbal behavior symbolizes more than specific meanings—it is expressive of entire cultural viewpoints...The nonverbal sign becomes a symbol within the culture of its sender. Its receiver, in any particular situation, may or may not attribute the same or similar value to it; the receiver may not attribute any symbolism to that sign at all” (Von Raffler-Engel 96).

To prevent the potential cross-cultural miscommunication Von Raffler-Engel describes, it is important to be cognizant of potential differences in nonverbal communication.

Anthropologist and cross-cultural researcher Edward T. Hall was a leader in the field of nonverbal communication research. Hall distinguished between high context cultures, in which many things are left verbally unsaid, allowing for nonverbal clues to determine meaning and low context cultures in which verbal communication is more direct. Hall also coined the term “proxemics” to describe the use of physical space in nonverbal communication. Haptics (touch), chronemics (the use of time), and kinesics (body movement) are also key aspects of nonverbal communication.

Regulation of the body

The Senses

Culture plays an important role in how humans perceive the functioning of the human body. One example is the cultural variation that exists in the perception of the five senses. Proposing a “sociology of the senses,” German sociologist Georges Simmel argues that “it is through the medium of the senses that we perceive our fellow-men” (1969). Similarly, Anthony Synnott affirms that: “Odors define the individual and the group, as do sight, sound and the other senses; and smell, like them mediates social interaction” (Synnott 183).

Each sense is not given the same level of importance in all societies, however. In his article “Rumi-

nations on Smell as a Sociocultural Phenomenon,” Kelvin Low gives attention to the low status of smell in the hierarchy of the senses in Western culture, which can be traced back to Aristotle’s hierarchy of the sensorium. Sight, on the other hand, has great importance in the West. For the Andaman Islanders, on the other hand, smell has a practical role. As fragrant flowers from the jungle bloom, it is possible to differentiate the aromas. Each season is thus marked by an “aroma force” and the year is organized according to a “calendar of scents” (Classen et al. 7).

Pain

The feeling of pain is one natural function that allows humans to recognize bodily threats or problems in the body. Still, while pain is a universal sensation, according to Kleinman et al., pain is also a cultural experience. They affirm that how individuals perceive and respond to pain, both in themselves and others is greatly influenced by their cultural background. They also argue that cultural factors influence how people communicate their pain to others. For the Chagga people of Tanzania, for example, pain during childbirth is not to be expressed: *“The Chagga are told from childhood that it is man’s nature to groan like a goat, but women suffer silently like sheep...She also knows that screams would shame her mother and make her mother-in-law critical of her. Thus most Chagga women are stoic during labor, suppressing loud cries”* (Kleinman et al. 17).

Reactions to pain do not only differ according to national or ethnic groups. Feelings of pain can also be mediated by specific social contexts. In an early study of the importance of cultural meaning on the perception of pain, American physician Henry Beecher found that combat soldiers who had experienced severe tissue trauma reported little or no pain associated with their injuries. After determining that the soldiers were not in shock and that they were capable of feeling pain, he concluded that their motivation to return home altered their perception of pain (Bendelow and Williams 211). It is not difficult to find a number of cultural contexts in which pain is tolerated and even encouraged because of a particular cultural or social reason (cer-

tain rites and beautification procedures, for example).

Health

In a related theme, the description and treatment of a variety of health issues can also differ from culture to culture. In a survey of descriptions of symptoms given in different cultures, Kleiman et al. show how culturally specific idioms and notions can influence how a concept as simple as the headache is expressed:

Ohnuki-Tierney, for example describes complaints among Sakhalin Ainu of Japan as including 'bear headaches' that 'sound' like the heavy steps of a bear; 'deer headaches' that feel like the much lighter sounds of running deer; and 'woodpecker headaches' that feel like a woodpecker pounding into the trunk of a tree" (O-T 1981:49). Ots (1990) describes a common experience of headache among Chinese characterized by a painful dizziness or vertigo—a complaint that is an embodiment of the traditional Chinese medical category of imbalance as the proximate cause of ill health. Abad and Boyce (1979: 34) report that Latinos in North America distinguish *dolor de cabeza* (headache) and *dolor del cerebro* (brainache) as two distinctive experiences and disorders. Headache is a common complaint of Latino patients who suffer *nervios*, a core idiom and syndrome of distress in Latin American cultures (Guarnaccia and Farias 1988). Ebigbo (1982) indicates that Nigerians complain of a wide range of specific pains, using language that would be considered potential indicators of psychosis in this country: 'it seems as if pepper were put into my head,' 'things like ants keep on creeping in various parts of my brain,' or 'by merely touching parts of my brain it hurts (Kleinman et al 1).

As these examples show, pain is not simply a biological response to a physiological stimulus. Its interpretation is a culturally informed reaction to and perception of the world. Responses to pain and illness thus depend greatly on cultural and social contexts.

Emotions

The body is directly connected to the expression of emotions. According to Michelle

Rosaldo, emotions are "embodied thoughts" which are somehow "felt in flushes, pulses, 'movements' of our livers, minds, hearts, stomachs, skin" (Rosaldo 143). In many Western cultures, the repression of emotions serves as a means of clearly defining the "outside" and the inside." The expression of emotion, particularly by men, is thus compared to a "leaky body." As Lupton explains, the control of emotions is never guaranteed, however: "Like body fluids, emotions 'flow, they seep, they infiltrate; their control is a matter of vigilance, never guaranteed' " (Lupton 97). At the same time, too much repression of emotions can cause them to become "blocked" or "stuck" in the body and lead to ill-health. In this culturally specific model, the self resides in a sort of "body-container" that requires constant monitoring to control the ebbs and flows of emotions (ibid).

Grief is one example of an emotion whose expression is culturally shaped. For example, while anthropologists tend to agree that "grief" is shown at funerals in most societies, "grief" is widely defined in this context and can include a range of emotions. Furthermore, the appropriate expression of grief can vary greatly between societies. In some cultures, the externalization of emotions is seen as taboo. While studying the Javanese, Geertz found that a young girl was chastised for crying during a funeral because tears were said to make it hard for the deceased to find his path to the grave and were thus negatively viewed (Huntington and Metcalf 60). In contrast, during his research on the indigenous people of the Andaman Islands, anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown found seven different occasions in which it is considered necessary to weep as part of ceremonial custom (Huntington and Metcalf 44).

Manners

In his book *The Civilizing Process*, Norbert Elias explores how a number of habits and customs have become formalized into the codes of manners and good behavior in Europe. Elias argues that as people began to live together in new ways, they were more affected by the actions of others and more cognizant of their own behavior during interactions, thus adopting new forms of controls. What

is interesting to Elias is how these norms have become internalized with each generation.

One example Elias gives to support his argument is the development of the use of the fork. He thus examines the cultural controls of conduct that led to the contemporary practice of using the fork:

“The suppression of eating by hand from one’s own plate has very little to do with the danger of illness, the so-called ‘rational’ explanation. In observing our feelings toward the fork ritual, we can see with particular clarity that the first authority in our decision between ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ behavior at table is our feeling of distaste. The fork is nothing other than the embodiment of a specific standard of emotions and a specific level of revulsion...The social standard to which the individual was first made to conform by external restraint is finally reproduced less smoothly within him, through a self-restraint which may operate even against his conscious wishes. Thus the socio-historical process of centuries, in the course of which the standard of what is felt to be shameful and offensive is slowly raised, is reenacted in abbreviated form in the life of the individual human being.” (Elias 53).

For Elias, the “fork ritual” has been implanted into Western society not only because generations of parents have taught their children that it is best to eat with a fork, but because with time, the rightness of this behavior has been internalized on an emotional level.

Taboo

While manners may proscribe certain behaviours when it comes to interacting with others, culturally demanded restrictions and controls can also be applied to the natural functioning of the body. British anthropologist Mary Douglas has written extensively on concepts of purity and taboo, most notably in her book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. For Douglas, there is an intimate relationship between the social body and the physical body:

“The human body is always treated as an image of society and...there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same

time a social dimension...Strong social control demands strong bodily control...Social intercourse requires that unintended or irrelevant organic processes should be screened out...Socialization teaches the child to keep organic processes under control. Of these, the most irrelevant and unwanted are the casting-off of waste products. Therefore, all such physical events, defecation, urination, vomiting and their products universally carry a pejorative sign for formal discourse” (Douglas 74).

Though the above processes are natural, Douglas argues that there is a tendency in certain cultures to try to distance humans from the “baser” processes of nature. Social interaction is believed to take place between “disembodied spirits” and all functioning that belies this reality must be repressed. Thus, we find that one should never blow one’s nose in public in South Korea or that in a number of societies, it is considered rude to eat in front of others.

Conclusion

By drawing upon a number of ethnographic studies, this article has given an overview of the ways in which perceptions of the body can differ from culture to culture. When considering the body from an cross-cultural perspective, it is essential to remember three things. First, ethnographies not only provide information about other cultures, but can also facilitate the development of a certain relativity with regards to one’s own culture. In her book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, anthropologist Margaret Mead highlights the importance of cultural relativity. According to Mead:

“As the traveller who has once been from home is wiser than he who has never left his own doorstep, so a knowledge of one other culture should sharpen our ability to scrutinize more steadily, to appreciate more lovingly, our own” (quoted in Dettwyler 115).

A comparison of different ways in which the body is perceived and acted upon across the globe calls into question assumptions regarding what is “natural” or “fixed” when it comes to the body.

Secondly, though written accounts serve as a window into the customs and traditions of other societies, it is important to not exoticize or overempha-

size cultural differences. No society is static and prevalent practices and beliefs should not be seen as monolithic. As Conklin and Morgan put it:

“While there is heuristic value in drawing the cross-cultural contrasts starkly, this runs the risk of overstating differences between societies while overemphasizing consensus within a society. Cultural ideologies of personhood are rarely shared uniformly by all members of a society, and people invoke different interpretations to suit different purposes” (Conklin and Morgan 1996).

In other words, within each society, sub-cultures based on social class, ethnicity, religion and other factors can influence how individuals perceive their own bodies and those around them. For example, in the West, despite dominant norms regarding the human life cycle and conceptions of personhood, bodily issues such as abortion and euthanasia continue to be hotly debated.

Finally, ethnographic descriptions of the body can also serve as a means of identifying cultural outliers and rebels. The idea of contested identities and Lock’s notion of “bodily dissent” draw attention to the ways in which individuals reject and reinterpret cultural standards related to the body. What is considered to be dissent is greatly dependent on the particular cultural context. For example, tattoos, piercings, and body modifications may be normalized in one culture while seen as extreme in another.

The body and culture interconnect in a number of ways in a number of ways that we were not able to develop in this text include sports, dance, and fitness among others. While it is not possible to describe all of the ways in which the body is culturally influenced in one text, the goal of this article has been to demonstrate the differences and the similarities that can exist across cultures. From the shape shifting *kamo* of New Caledonia to the practice of “doing the month” in China, the above examples serve to illustrate the ways in which the body is culturally constructed. Ultimately, by using a cross-cultural approach, we hope we have shown how the body can serve as a cultural canvas, reflecting the values and norms of a society, yet able to be redefined and repurposed by the individual.

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