Pushing the Limits of the Body Gender, Material Culture and the Changes of Consciousness

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ABSTRACT

In the line of recent works on the relationship between body and gender, this paper examines the bodily investment of gender construction. Grounded in an ethnography, it focuses on the ways in which gender relations are constructed around material objects, especially ‘heavy’ objects, and how physical strength is used to elaborate those relations. It is argued that gender relations are embodied in physical practices. As such, the body operates or constrains changes of consciousness relating to gender relations. In other words, it is suggested that changes of consciousness may be embedded in the physical involvement with things.

Recent gender studies are questioning the traditional Beauvoirienne opposition between the social construction of gender and the naturalness of the body; an opposition which sends us back to that of culture and nature (Butler, 1993; 1999; Broch-Due, 1993; Laqueur, 1990). This questioning is consistent with recent developments in social sciences which reappraise the usefulness and the validity of traditional dichotomies such as culture and nature, socialness and materiality, gender and body in favour of dialectic modes of thinking reintroducing the subject and its subjectivity. As part of this general questioning, this paper examines the bodily investment of gender construction. As such, it attempts to push further Costa (1994), Catterall, Maclaran and Stevens et al.’s (2000) pioneering works on gender in consumer research. This paper focuses on the ways in which gender relations are constructed around material objects, especially ‘heavy’ objects, and how physical strength is used to elaborate those relations. Drawing upon Butler’s work, this paper’s argument is that biology and the materiality of the body can not be put into brackets. Body is not a passive surface upon which differences are created; it is used in the creation of those differences. The paper describes the sexual division of tasks on moving day with a particular attention devoted to the use of physical strength. It analyses how the use of physical strength responds to a performative logic nourished by a naturalist discourse on gender relations. It also suggests that changes of consciousness regarding gender relations may be achieved at the level of practices, by working on the body.

This reflection is grounded in the study of practices; in what people do with things, as opposed to what they say or claim to be doing. It is based upon an
ethnographic fieldwork conducted in North America (Montreal). It assumes that moving provides a window onto gender construction ‘in practice’ as it implies a range of gendered behaviour and norms. Indeed, the issue of physical strength is in the backdrop of moving. Moving involves a wide range of gendered behaviours. It also reveals a gendered conception of comportments implying physical strength. Using ethnographic evidence, the paper explores the sexual division of labour on the moving day. It shows how a move is an occasion on which gender roles are created and enacted, with the physicality acting as both the determinant of these roles and the determination. What is really enacted during a move, however, is a fictional opposition of genders which asserts itself strongly inasmuch as it borrows on the effect of naturalness and a discourse on natural differences between men and women. As Butler (1999) would probably put it, it is a fictional illusion of gender complementarity. Following Young (1989) and Butler, the analyses reveals the performative character of the use of physical strength on the occasion of the move. It shows how physicality is used in the creation of gender differences. The paper stresses how gender comportments may be unconsciously reproduced. It suggests that gender relations reside at the level of practices.

A question arises therefore as to whether the feminist discourse on gender roles has fully reached the level of physical involvement with things. Put differently, it is questionable whether changes in consciousness have reached the level of practices. Borrowing Bourdieu’s ‘habitus’ (1979), it could be argued that the gendered relations is embodied into practices which resurfaces at the time of the move, in a crisis context, despite a feminist ideology and a belief in gender equality shared by many middle class informants. These gender relations do not endure because of a lack of bodily practice, however; the people encountered during the fieldwork master the practices of moving. They do persist because of a lack of recognition of the importance of practices, especially those practices involving objects.

The ethnographic evidence presented here demonstrates how body mediates and transforms people’s investment in relations. It reveals the role of objects as mediators of social relations. It also tends to show that changes of consciousness only acquire their efficacy once they have reached the level of practices; once they moved beyond the discursive level and reached Merleau-Ponty’s locus of subjectivity: the body. As a consequence, this paper sheds serious doubts on the possibility to actually achieve transformations of consciousness regarding gender role at the expense of some work on the body, without pushing the limits of our understanding of the body. This reflection is only a first step. More research is needed on the material culture of gender. Having said that, it supports the claim to provide consumer research with a particular body of knowledge on gender. It sustains the claim that gender can not be reduced to an ancillary dimension of behaviour; that it is rather a constitutive aspect of identity. This is why, as consumer researchers, we need to improve our understanding of how people invest on their body; how they ‘make’ their body, as well as how their body ‘makes’ them.

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