

Symposium Title: Contentious Embodiment

Organized by: OZSW Study group Feminist Philosophy

Abstract Symposium:

The proposed symposium is organized by the OZSW study group Feminist Philosophy. Feminist Theory is well-known for theorizing the body. The papers in this symposium will demonstrate the various ways in which embodiment is conceived of in feminist and critical theory. We will discuss ethnographical, phenomenological, neo-materialist and poststructuralist approaches to embodiment.

We consider embodiment “contentious” in more than one sense. In the first place, the body is still underthematized in philosophy (for instance, in debates around personal identity). Within the history of Western thought the body has predominantly been conceptualized as belonging to the realm of nature, set apart from our rational faculties and therefore less worthy of serious philosophical attention. In the second place, in those cases in which the body is thematized, embodiment most of the times is considered in a neutral and abstract way. Factors that in daily life are important for our sense of self - such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age and ability – are hardly ever accounted for. The proposed papers do consider these factors, and therewith contribute to the development of philosophical frameworks for understanding the relation between embodiment, subjectivity and identity. The focus on everyday life experiences is the last sense in which embodiment is contentious: thematizing embodiment implies bringing everyday practices to philosophical consideration.

The individual papers thematize different aspects of embodiment, that are part of everyday practices: exercise, sports, sexuality . In paper 1, the general problem of the relation between embodiment and personal identity will be addressed. The paper aims at a notion of personal identity that takes into account intersectional factors that situate a person socially. Based on empirical research on the experiences of elite sports women, paper 2 reconsiders poststructuralist frameworks in sport and gender research and by drawing on the philosophy of play proposes an alternative framework for understanding the relation between discipline, subjectivity and agency. Paper 3 will discuss ideas about embodiment in relation to ‘mental health’, drawing on (auto)phenomenographic research on the practice of running therapy. It will reflect on the embodied position of a (feminist, crip) researcher in the field of mental healthcare, and propose to shift the research lens between embodied experiences and processes of abledment/ableism.

Abstracts papers:

Paper 1: The socially situated self: intersectionality and personal identity

Since the introduction of the notion of intersectionality in gender studies in the late eighties of the last century (Crenshaw 1989), it is seen as constitutive for personal identity. It is generally taken as an alternative for the single axis perspective of identity politics, because of its focus on the interrelation between gender, class, race, ethnicity and other social determinants (Crenshaw 1991; Yuval-Davis 2006). Intersectionality has been challenged for focusing too much on identity, while overlooking social structures and institutions (Yuval-Davis 2006), for considering a too strict notion of identity, that does not help overcoming identity politics (Grosz 2011), but also for considering identity too little (Staunæs 2003; Prins 2006). In all of these cases, the “identity” referred to primarily signifies one’s belonging to social groups on the basis of bodily characteristics. “Identity” pertains to the social determinants that situate the self, the so-called “intersectional axes” (Yuval-Davis 2006) or “crossroads” (Crenshaw 1989) that position the self socially.

In this paper, I will argue that even though this is a relevant aspect of personal identity, it does not provide a complete account of it, and that theorizing intersectionality can gain from understanding personal identity in a fuller sense. Apart from what can be called the “idem”-aspect of personal identity, or whatness, that the intersectional factors pertain to, identity also has an “ipse”-aspect (whoness) that characterizes someone as a person. It is precisely the latter aspect that constitutes experiential selfhood. In order to understand how selfesteem and selfrespect are related to social determinants, such as gender, class, race, intersectionality theories need to consider both sides of identity.

For a notion that combines these aspects, I suggest to turn to the philosophical debate over personal identity, more specifically to the narrative accounts of the self, developed in the nineties of the last century by Paul Ricoeur (1990) and Marya Schechtman (1996). The trouble is, however, that these philosophical accounts of the self do not thematize the social determinants of personal identity. While in daily life, factors such as gender, race, class for a large part constitute who we are, in most philosophical theories they are barely accounted for. The narrative notions of identity therefore need an extra dimension. In the last part of the paper, I will develop this alternative: the self as expression, that is embodied and that does take into account one’s social situatedness. On this basis, personal identity will prove to pertain to subjective self-understanding as well as to the social structures that situate the self, and it will become understandable that these structures not only position us socially, but that we are also able to negotiate them.

Paper 2: Elite women sports and the limits of critique. Towards a feminist playology

The introduction of Marxist and poststructuralist social theory into the field of sport research has enabled critical sport studies to further think the relation between language, the body and the subject's inside. In modern sports, discipline is no longer applied from without, but internalized in such a way that the conformation to norms becomes the mode of self-realization. To be more precise, critical sport studies criticize modern sporting practices for treating the body of the athlete as inert matter that can be moulded, shaped, quantified and measured by sport data analysts, psychologists, trainers, physicians and dieticians. Focussing on identity constructions and the question of gender-normalization in relation to high performance sport, sport and gender studies complement these critiques by addressing the intimate relation between gender and techniques of control. Hence critical sport and gender research importantly show that despite the growth in media and public interest and increasing levels of support systems in the world of elite sports, oppressive gender norms and stereotypes still persist.

However, based on extensive fieldwork - in-depth interviews with elite sports women and participant observation - this paper argues that a poststructuralist framework alone is not capable of making sense of the experiences of elite sports women, more philosophically put their place in the world. The experiences of the players as reflected on by themselves reveal that these 'objectivist' analyses cannot fully account for the players' willingness to sacrifice health, social life etc. For this willingness transcends elite sporting culture and its disciplinary techniques.

Second, this paper argues that the missing aspect in critical sport and gender research to adequately account for players' willingness to sacrifice, must be understood as an element of play, or the 'playfulness' of sports. Along with the categories of 'gender policing' and 'high performance' 'playfulness' must be considered a key structure of the experiences of elite sportswomen. Play here does not refer to a particular form of behaviour praised for its biological or psychological benefits nor to a certain attitude of the individual sports woman, or to the structures of the game as such. On the other hand, drawing on the work of the pre-rational play theorists, Johan Huizinga, Eugen Fink, Hans Georg Gadamer and Mihai I. Spariosu, in this paper play will be discussed as an embodied, affective experience that belongs to an ontological distinct category, i.e. a reality that surpasses the individual and temporarily suspends 'ordinary' or 'real' life.

Thus third, this paper argues that the theorisation of the workings of gender, and high performance, should be complemented with a theoretical account of play. It is only by adding this third aspect that a comprehensive understanding of the structures of experience of elite sports women can be accounted for. Hence play makes visible that social constructivist and critical theoretical accounts of the workings of gender and disciplinary practices miss important insights about the structures of experience. The analysis of playfulness is however not independent of the analysis of gender or disciplinary practices. Therefore an account that is sensitive to playfulness will yield new insights about subjectivity, sexual difference and agency.

Paper 3: Being able to live a daily life? Embodiment and the process of abledment in the treatment of depression

If according to the World Health Organization depression is the leading cause of ill health and disability worldwide (WHO 2017), it is to say that depression gets in the way of people's daily functioning, causing not only suffering to individuals and their loved ones, but also, and not in the least, costing society a lot of money. Speaking from within this neoliberal health paradigm, the WHO presents the body as a resource from which to extract productive and successful living. When the body does not deliver, something needs to be done –whether it is to find the cause and cure, get psychological treatment or find a way to self-improve - to become *healthy* and *able* again.

The dualisms ill/healthy and able/disabled, are only two of many dualisms structuring modern discourse –mind/body is another important one- following a divisive and excluding logic in which one is always on top of the other, some bodies more than others pushed to the margins of society. As disability scholar Fiona Kumari Campbell (2009) argues with Bruno Latour (1991), it is the modern division between able/disabled that allows for a process of translation from 'disabled' to 'able' to be set in motion. In other words: disability is the negative identity created to produce ableness. On an individual level this means, as Foucault showed in his work on disciplinary power and normalization, that to find oneself wanting, doing or being something society values negatively, makes one both develop a negative sense of self or identity and work harder to overcome this. It could be argued, as it is being done in critical disability and affect theory, that it is precisely the high prevalence of feelings of exhaustion, fatigue, dread, sadness, feelings of being stuck, not able to go on anymore – often labelled as burn-out or depression – that points to the exhaustion of neoliberal capitalism and its disabling politics. On the level of personal experience however, this critical analysis hardly helps one in need of care, as a subject in society caught up in this ableist orientation. A bodily reorientation, to borrow from Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) or a focus on the materiality of bodies, as Campbell (2009) suggests, is needed to find a way out of disabling dualistic logic. This implies the affirmation of discomfort and unruliness 'spilling' from bodies labelled as ill or disabled, tuning in to the experiences of living bodies seeping through tight and suffocating mental health regimes. Furthermore, instead of pointing the gaze at labelled bodies from the assumption of health and ableness, Campbell proposes to shift the gaze. In line with Foucault's ethical-aesthetic imperative of freedom practices: to refuse who you are (to refuse identity), she refuses the notion of able(ness), and instead shifts her attention to processes of abledment.

It is this tension between critical analysis of social-political structures (diagnosing society) and writing about and from personal embodied experiences (including internalised ableism and self-stigmatisation) that I will address in this paper. Drawing on my –ongoing- (auto)phenomenological research on the practice of running therapy as treatment for depression in the Netherlands, I propose to shift the research lens between embodied experiences and processes of abledment/ableism.