Reflections on embodiment and vulnerability

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Bodies matter as our experience of them is the basis both for social life and also for much medical and social research. There has been a spectacular increase in academic research on the body in the last twenty years or so. This paper—although a review of three ethnographic studies on the seemingly disparate and narrow fields of the embodiment of working class experience, boxing, and ballet—illuminates the broader relationships between the body, self, and society. Our paper works on three levels: firstly, as an account of the “lived experience” of embodied vulnerability; secondly, as an application of Bourdieu’s theoretical schema, and thirdly, as a philosophically grounded critique of radical social constructionist views of the body.

The recent *Oxford Companion to the Body*¹ exemplifies the growing interest in the topic of “the body”. In this paper we reflect upon the salience of the writings of Pierre Bourdieu, and on that of several other researchers influenced by Bourdieu’s distinctive anthropology and sociology of the body. We give a brief account of some of the ways in which Bourdieu’s research centres on “embodied practices”. We also suggest that a Bourdieusian approach is a more productive alternative than the still dominant biomedical and social constructionist approaches to the body.² We illustrate our argument with three “Bourdieuian ethnographies”, each of which can be read as a study of the embodiment of vulnerability. First, the work of Charlesworth³ on working class experiences; second, of Wacquant⁴ on boxing, and third, of Wainwright and Turner on the balletic body.^{5–8} We conclude with a brief evaluation of the salience of a Bourdieusian approach to the body and medical humanities.

BOURDIEU AND THE BODY

Bourdieu’s corpus of work is widely viewed as a productive approach to both theory and research on the body.^{9–10} In essence, Bourdieu links agency (practice) with structure (via capital and field) through the process of “habitus”. In plainer language, our social practices as agents are usually the result of various habitual schemas and dispositions (habitus), combined with various types of resources (capital) that we have accrued, and these forms of capital are then activated by certain structured social conditions (field) that they both belong to, and reproduce and modify. To give a concrete example of this process, surgeons have a markedly different habitus from butchers, because they are the product of

the medical field that is restricted to those with impressive educational qualifications and then rewards those who become surgeons with knowledge, status, money, and power (or in Bourdieu’s terms with cultural capital, symbolic capital, economic capital, and social capital).

Moreover, our social history is incorporated. For instance, there are striking differences in posture between men and women—often men sit with their legs akimbo, whilst women sit with their legs carefully placed together. Moreover, adults do not, generally, consciously teach these postural differences to children; rather children acquire such social practices subconsciously. Thus girls are not explicitly taught how to “throw like a girl”,¹¹ but they attain such a bodily state by living in a particular social world. So habitus is, basically, an acquired scheme of dispositions. In the famous phrase of Bourdieu: “when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a ‘fish in water’ . . . it takes the world about itself for granted”.¹² A butcher may possess the technical skills to amputate a leg, but he would feel quite out of place assisting a surgeon in an operating theatre.

Furthermore, “the way people treat their bodies reveals the deepest dispositions of the habitus”.¹³ Bourdieu,¹³ in brief, argues that physical capital (in the form of body shape, gait, and posture) is largely socially produced through—for example, sport, food, and etiquette. Moreover, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus: “illuminate[s] the circular process whereby practices are incorporated within the body, only then to be regenerated through the embodied work and competence of the body”.¹⁴ Working class women—for example, will walk, talk, eat, and participate in very different sports from upper class women. This difference in habitus, between the working class and the upper class, is the subject of a famous passage in *Distinction*. Here Bourdieu summarises the habitus of the petit bourgeois as: “Strict and sober, discreet and severe, in his dress, his speech, his gestures and his whole bearing, he always lacks something in stature, breadth, substance, largesse”.¹⁵

Moreover, these traces of physical capital may also be converted into economic capital—for example, through boxing—typically by the working class.⁴ Or, at the opposite end of this spectrum, through, say, moving from Oxbridge to a job in a merchant bank. In other words, physical capital “is the ability of dominant groupings to define their bodies and lifestyle as superior, worthy of reward, and as metaphorically and literally, the embodiment of class.”¹⁵ To coin an aphorism: capital spawns capital. Bourdieu¹³ views the transmission of physical capital as a hidden form of privilege, that can, as our merchant banker example illustrates, be converted into economic capital.

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Habitus is, in gist, an appropriated set of generative dispositions. Some of these dispositions are bodily ones. Hence, for Bourdieu: “the apparently most insignificant techniques of the body—ways of walking or blowing one’s nose, ways of eating or talking . . . [reveal] the most fundamental principles of construction and evaluation of the social world”.¹⁶ The lifestyles of the different social classes become inscribed on and in their bodies. Furthermore, physical capital—via body shape, gait, posture, speech, and so on—contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities. In other words, the body is a bearer of value in society.¹⁰ This point is vividly illustrated in Charlesworth’s research³ on “working class bodies”, and it is to this that we now turn.

WORKING CLASS BODIES

Variations in the amount of the different forms of capital (physical, economic, cultural [roughly, knowledge], social [essentially, social networks], and symbolic [approximately, status]) means, “one can begin to map out a universe of class bodies. . . . It is no accident that bodily properties are perceived through social systems of classification which are not independent of the distribution of these properties among the social classes”.¹⁷ For example, Charlesworth,¹⁸ generalising from his poignant phenomenology of the working class body in Rotherham (South Yorkshire, UK) writes that: “Labour is unrooted, dis-embedded . . . creating people so *vulnerable* and atomized that they carry the marks of their impoverishment in their bodies. . . . For too many the sands of their time and experience have been washed away from beneath them, taking with them the customary reference points of their existence”.¹⁹ The experience of the physicality of work, for those working class youths that are, at the present time, fortunate to have a job is wonderfully evoked in a quotation from one of his informants. “Ten mo’ore y’r ah labourin’ and mi’ body’ll bi fucked, an’ thi’s s’mayn unemployed that thi can sack yer an’ get someb’dy younger”.²⁰ In other words, this manual labourer’s lack of cultural, symbolic, economic, and social capital compels him to use his physical capital. This is the one form of capital with which he can make a living, but this then traps him in a social world from which there is no escape. It is almost impossible for the manual worker to accrue the forms of capital that would enable him to become “a fish in water” in another (and better) social world. His body, like that of some boxers and dancers (below), is a fragile instrument that “wear and tear” will ultimately destroy at a relatively young age.

THE BOXING BODY

Working class experience, boxing, and ballet are all specific examples of the more general point that: “agents create and mould their bodies in accordance with the fields in which they are involved and the demands of those specific fields”.²¹ The seminal paper by Wacquant⁴—on the making of the boxer’s body—has, to some degree, acted as a template for our own research on the “balletic body”. What is striking in Wacquant’s paper,⁴ however, is the way that the objective structures of the social world of boxing are embodied in the boxer’s habitus. For example, he notes how: “The boxer wilfully perseveres into this potentially self destructive trade because, in a very real sense, he is inhabited by the game that he inhabits . . . a veteran middleweight who has rumbled on three continents for over a decade . . . [commented] ‘you can’t (give it up) it’s *in your blood so much* . . . you can’t give it up’”.²² In short, habitus is a processing of structure.

Although Wacquant⁴ makes much of Bourdieu’s notions of physical capital and field, he says, however, virtually nothing about the boxer’s habitus. Wacquant²³ notes how thin lanky boxers use reach, speed, and technique to become “boxers”; whist shorter, stubby boxers use strength and toughness to become “fighters” (or “sluggers” or “brawlers”). We would go

further and argue that physical capital, in the form of body shape, tends to mould boxers into one of these styles or types of boxer. To adapt Bourdieu, we suggest that the boxer’s *individual habitus* is moulded by the *institutional habitus* of the boxing gym. Or, in the language of Giddens’s structuration theory,²⁴ the boxer’s body is both the *medium* and the *outcome* of their innate physical capital.

Wacquant²⁵ also notes that if you, as a social researcher: “Walk into a boxing gym . . . you cannot but be struck by the sight and sounds of bodies everywhere and enraptured by the strange, ballet-like spectacle they offer”. This resonance between the “male world” of boxing and the “female world” of ballet is captured in Bernard Taper’s particularly evocative “thick description” of his visit to watch George Balanchine rehearsing the New York City Ballet. Taper writes: “The rehearsal studio of a ballet company is something of a cross between a convent and a prizefight gym. Before the dancers go into action, they paw a resin box in a corner, like fighters, and when they make their way about the room between classes or rehearsal sessions, they are apt—even the most petite of ballerinas—to walk with a pugilist’s flat footed but springy gait, shoulders swaying with a bit of a swagger, arms hanging loosely. There is the acrid sweat smell of the gym, and the same formidable presence of lithe, steel-muscled, incredibly trim and capable bodies ruthlessly forcing themselves to become even trimmer and more capable—a spirituality achieved, paradoxically, by means of single-minded concentration on the body”.²⁶ We see here how the physicality of ballet requires the unrelenting development and refinement of physical capital. In a telling simile, George Balanchine contends that: “A dancer is like a musical instrument. It must be played with a full-bodied tone—and *pitilessly*”.²⁷

THE BALLETTIC BODY

Ballet is a surprisingly neglected topic in the sociology of the body.^{5–8, 28} More generally, research on the body has been chastised for privileging theorising and for ignoring the practical experiences of embodiment. Moreover, little attention has been focused on the ways that specific social worlds shape human bodies. By concentrating on the embodiment of the dancer, we depart from the contemporary emphasis on dance as a discursive practice within which the dancer becomes strangely disembodied.^{5–8} Much “cultural studies” research is “sociology at a distance”. In contrast, our ethnographic research on the body in dance primarily uses interviews to glean first hand accounts of the embodiment of ballet. For Ballet is, surely, a—perhaps the—paradigm case of embodiment. Our research aims to illuminate six aspects of this archetype of embodiment: habitus, injury, aging, careers, the cultural production of ballet, and the globalisation of the body in ballet. Our studies combine our interests in the body, medical sociology, qualitative research, social theory, and philosophy. In this paper, however, we will only draw upon our work on aging, retirement, and career in ex-Royal Ballet (London) dancers. Our research works, we hope, on three levels: firstly, as an account of ex-dancers’ “lived experience” of embodiment; secondly, as an “extension” of Bourdieu’s theoretical schema, and thirdly, as a philosophically grounded critique of radical social constructionist views of the body. In the next section we will demonstrate some of our attempts at integrating our research data with social theory and philosophy.

But before we engage in this typically “Bourdieuian quest” we want briefly to talk about the three reasons that led us to utilise Bourdieu’s research. Firstly, Bourdieu’s conceptual armoury is especially useful for eliciting and illuminating first hand accounts of the social world. In particular, we draw upon an array of concepts developed by Bourdieu—habitus, capital, and field—in our investigations of the body in classical ballet. Secondly, although Bourdieu is widely acknowledged to have made a seminal contribution to the sociology of the arts, his

focus is on literature and painting,^{29–30} with only the occasional reference to classical music³¹ and the theatre.^{13–30} In short, he has neglected dance as an art form. Our research can, therefore, be seen as a contribution to the extension of the Bourdieusian corpus to the field of ballet and dance. Thirdly, Bourdieu's concepts—unlike those of, say, Giddens³⁴ or Foucault³²—are grounded in the body^{10–33} and are, therefore, especially salient in an ethnography of embodiment.

We argue that schooling and discipline are key processes in the acquisition of a balletic bodily habitus. We also draw on other aspects of Bourdieu's schema and suggest that the acquisition of physical capital and cultural capital contribute to a dancer's habitus. Our research also generates insights into dancers' views on injury, aging, and health. Both injury and aging are “fateful moments”³⁴ which prompt dancers to confront their bodies. We focus on these potential epiphanies as they encourage dancers to reflect on something they are not usually consciously aware of, namely, their “bodily habitus”.

Epiphanies and habitus

Megan, for example, recalled suffering an injury that meant she could not perform on stage for some nine months. Despite being a leading principal dancer with the Royal Ballet, the injury shattered her acquired balletic habitus. She was so keen to regain this, however, that she asked to dance in the corps de ballet (the equivalent of the drop in academia from professor to lecturer in the UK) on a company tour of South America. She recalls below how her traumatic return to the stage, threatened not only her ballet habitus but also her social identity—even her personhood (“I was no longer me”).

Megan: I walked on as a court lady in the first performance of *Swan Lake* and couldn't curtsy when I got onto the middle of the stage because my legs were shaking so much. *I was really really scared and horrified that I could have so totally have lost everything that I'd taken for granted before.* Performing with the company had never bothered me. And now, suddenly, *I found that I was this alien person. . . . I was no longer me.* I would say it was easily over a year from the accident before I was really back on form.

Habitus: from physical capital to cultural capital

Physical capital is disrupted by injury, but in addition, our stock of physical capital is also transient: it grows and then declines with age—and it dies with us. Physical capital provides a productive way of understanding the embodiment of dance. Moreover, it seems likely that the inevitable decline of physical capital of the aging body may be more difficult for “athletes”, such as dancers, to accept than for people for whom “the body” is less important in the formation of their self identity (like, say, academics). This change in habitus that the aging dancer must undergo is captured in a quote from Dudley, who gave up dancing, at the age of 28, because of a back injury; to become a world famous ballet teacher.

I had no problems at all until about five years ago when I was teaching. I taught four classes a day, I taught seven days a week. Then all of a sudden—*crash. It is traumatic, in a way, because your body is a means of expression.* What I've had to learn to do now is to express myself verbally. Which I've always been able to do, but now I've had to do it more. *I've had to describe it more, and describe the feelings of what's involved, rather than say “well this is what it looks like”.*

This transformation can be thought of as a move from the use of physical capital to cultural capital: a deep and embodied knowledge of ballet that comes from being steeped in the balletic social world.

Aging and career in ballet: the ontology of aging

Some academics argue that there has been a biomedicalisation of aging,³⁵ but this biological approach to aging has been challenged by others who argue that aging is wholly socially constructed,³⁶ We suggest, however, that the aging dancer vividly depicts the limitations of a social reductionist approach to aging as it ignores the inevitable biological decline in physical capital that aging brings. For example:

Rudolf: I retired at 38. I would say the last three years [I was] increasingly aware of aches that hadn't been there in the past, and also the fact that you take a little bit longer to recover from a particular exertion. When I first did that (Tybalt in *Romeo & Juliet*) I was fine. But as I got a little older my wife would always notice when I got out of bed and creaked! When you talk about aging, the danger that happens to people in their late thirties is that *their brain thinks they can do it and the body doesn't*, and that's when you run the risk of hurting yourself. There are suddenly things that you could do last year and you threw yourself into but, *gravity takes over and you hit the floor a little earlier than you thought!* It's a young person's job, it always has been.

This notion that “your head thinks it can do it but your body no longer can” chimes with a radical social constructionist view of epistemology where, essentially, “the world” is merely a social construction. The world, however, retorts to our epistemological claims about it.³⁷ Hence, Bourdieu has argued that: “It is not sufficient to change language or theory to change reality. . . . While it never does harm to point out that gender . . . or ethnicity . . . are social constructs, it is naïve . . . to suppose that one only has to ‘deconstruct’ these social artefacts. . . . *One may . . . doubt the reality of a resistance which ignores the resistance of reality*”.³⁸ Or, in Rudolf's words “gravity takes over and you hit the floor a little earlier than you thought!”

RETIREMENT FROM THE COMPANY: INDIVIDUAL VERSUS INSTITUTIONAL HABITUS

Ballet is an art that is literally inscribed on the body. Both ballet technique and, especially, ballet artistry is handed on from one generation to the next.³⁹ Because ballet is “a calling” that defines the identity of the performer, retirement from the Royal Ballet Company was usually viewed with dread.

Dexter: I've got to retire in a year's time which I'm not very happy about. I've been here for 46 years and I've done all the roles and I've coached for a long time. Peter Wright [director of the Royal Ballet's sister company] said to me: “People like you shouldn't retire. You've got too much to offer. Lavatory attendants should be forced to retire at 65, not people like you”!

In this paper our focus has been on Bourdieu and the body. Our final quotation synthesises our themes of embodiment, habitus, physical capital, cultural capital, aging, and career in ballet.

Megan: I still feel some days as if I'd love to be able to jump up and move. There's suddenly a piece of music playing in the studio or there's a particular role. I mean, in the ballet we are doing at the moment. God, *I loved it so much and just have such vivid memories of the joy of that ballet and those performances.* I think all of us do that did leading roles in that ballet. But in a sense you just think what would it be like to wind the clock, and do it now with all the knowledge one has now. And there is something so sad that dancers' careers really are relatively short. Because *just at that point when you are in your midthirties, I think, you just*

begin to understand so much more about the world, and yourself, and life, and other people, and emotions. But you can no longer dance like you could when you were 25. So it's a cruel business.

Dancers often speak of “muscle memory”—the ability of their bodies to remember particular sequences of dance steps perhaps years after they last danced them. Riding a bike is a more everyday example of an embodied practice. The inevitable physical decline of the “aging dancer” is, to some extent, offset by their growing practical cultural knowledge of the ballets in which they danced. There comes a point, however, when artistic capital can no longer supplement the deterioration in the dancer's physical prowess. Retirement from dancing the classical roles of the ballet repertory is then inevitable. Yet this occurs at a time when most professional careers are still developing; so “it's a cruel business” indeed.

CONCLUSIONS

The evolution of self identity is a common theme in the contemporary sociological literature. Variations on this theme include the notions of biographical disruption,⁴⁰ epiphanies,⁴¹ fateful moments,³³ and transformational experiences.⁴² The main point we wish to make is that all of these sources have a resonance with narrative accounts of the social world. As Holstein and Gubrium⁴³ argue, our selves are embedded within our biography—past, present, and, future. Working class experiences, boxing, and professional dance all invite more comprehensive social research on the reciprocal relationships between the lived body and society.

On a more abstract level the body remains a site of philosophical contest. There are three dominant and differing perspectives on the body: naturalistic, social constructionist, and phenomenological.¹⁰ We regard the two extreme polar positions on the body, where one camp claims the body is wholly biological whilst the other claims that the body is wholly social constructed, as indefensible. We, like many others, advocate a moderate position where the body has a material base that is shaped in a social context.⁹ Our more moderate constructionist stance contends that: “While illness as a biophysical state exists independently of human knowledge and evaluation, illness as a social state is created and shaped by human knowledge and evaluation”.⁴⁴ In other words, the body is socially moderated, not simply invented by society.¹⁰ In a similar vein, Williams⁴⁵ argues against the marked postmodern tendency in much of the literature on chronic illness and disability (where a rather ethereal body disappears into discourse); and for a realist view of the materiality of bodies that then grounds, say, the phenomenological experience, of pain. Our paper is therefore a contribution to the growing literature that sees “medical humanities” as the melding of the biological, the social, and the human.

In summary, we see ballet as an interesting and productive way through which to synthesise a wide range of seemingly disparate topics. Hence we agree with Bourdieu when he writes that: “A particular case that is well constructed ceases to be particular”.⁴⁶ Dancers of the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden, working class experiences of Rotherham, and a boxing gym in Chicago are three very different fields of social life. We hope that this paper begins to show some of the ways in which a focus on “Bourdieu and the body” can achieve this laudable aim.

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