



Digital actualizations of gender and embodiment: Microanalysis of online pregnancy discourse



Olga Sutherland, Laura Forbes*, Blair Hodgson, Kelvie McLaren

Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition, University of Guelph, 50 Stone Rd., Guelph ON Canada N1G 2W1

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 1 September 2014

SYNOPSIS

This study examines how the pregnant body is constituted using language. It is based on a detailed analysis of pregnant women's online communications taken from a social networking website. The data were analyzed using discourse analysis with the aim of identifying how (i.e., with what socio-linguistic practices) women constructed their pregnant embodiment and what social and rhetorical purposes such constructions served in situations of their production. We also attended to how participants' local descriptions were informed by broader socio-cultural dynamics of power and norms concerning health, fitness, and femininity. Implications of the analysis for future research, theorizing, and practice are discussed.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

In the past several decades, the human body has been subjected to scientific debate and scrutiny across various disciplines (Sweeney & Hodder, 2002). Sweeney and Hodder outlined historical developments in the West accounting for a growing interest in the topic of embodiment, including photography and digital manipulation of the body, the holocaust, biological research and medical technologies, shifting demographics, to name a few. An important contributor to this increasing interest in the body has been feminist work challenging male control and objectification of the female body (e.g., Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1993; Shildrick, 1997). Indeed, the body has been at the center of feminist critique and “remained, for all of the various feminists, a vital site for the working out of the intersections of feminist politics, theory, and practice in postmodernity” (Balsamo, 1996, p. 39).

Pregnancy has been described as an embodied experience and transition (Nash, 2012a, 2012b; Neiterman, 2012). During pregnancy the body undergoes rapid and extensive physical changes, such as transformations in body size, shape, and weight (Chang, Kenney, & Chao, 2010; Clark, Skouteris, Wertheim, Paxton, & Milgrom, 2009). Aside from the task of adapting to these bodily changes and developing a different relationship to their bodies (Bailey, 1999), women are expected to engage in

distinct normative practices of pregnancy, such as adhere to nutritional and weight gain recommendations (Neiterman, 2012). Therefore, pregnancy constitutes a relevant and potentially fruitful site of the study of the body.

The study is primarily informed by Judith Butler's (1993) notion of performativity, defined as “discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names” (p. 13). Performativity does not mean reducing material bodies to discourse but exploring how certain representations (e.g., biomedical) become dominant within a society and determine what is real (Barad, 2008). Butler argued that not only gender is discursively constructed but also sex, something conventionally seen as “natural,” inherent, and pre-discursive. Individuals “assume” gender and sex through reiteration of cultural norms in their daily lives. For Butler, sexing and gendering, that is practices that distinguish certain individuals as “women,” are not willful or deliberate human activities but are the workings of the heterosexual regime.

Following these insights, we sought to identify and describe the discursive means by which the heterosexual and patriarchal imperatives enable certain bodies and sexed identifications. In particular, we explored how pregnant women constructed, negotiated, and “performed” their (gendered) embodiment. To this end, we analyzed pregnancy-related digital communications from a social networking site *Reddit*. The analysis is based

* Corresponding author.

on the view of the body as produced by and through discourse (Butler, 1993; Foucault, 1979). In embodiment, the discursive and the material come together. The materiality of the body includes not only physical and concrete elements but also virtual components, or as van Doorn (2011) put it, “embodiment can be understood to include a vital virtual component, since the experience of one’s material body depends on a multitude of *incorporeal* (e.g., psychological, cultural, artistic, and spiritual) practices and thus cannot be located within a stable ‘natural’ body” (p. 534, *italics* in the original). Prior to discussing the results of the analysis, we review the relevant literature and further delineate our theoretical and methodological commitments.

Embodiment through a feminist lens

The topic of embodiment has been approached from a range of theories across various disciplines (see Weiss & Haber, 1999), including feminist perspectives (e.g., Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Conboy, Medina, & Stanbury, 1997; Horner & Keane, 2000; Price & Shildrick, 1999; Schiebinger, 2000). In this study we primarily drew on postmodern feminist and poststructural writing. According to postmodern feminists, the body in the West has been conventionally treated as separate from and inferior to the mind (Davis & Walker, 2010). The assumption of the mind–body split tracing back to the work of René Descartes in the 17th century has informed much contemporary scholarship in social and natural sciences. Historically, women were either invisible or reduced to their reproductive role, with their bodies being portrayed as an obstacle to pure rational being, spiritual growth, and social order (Shildrick, 1997). Some feminist writers suggested that the reproductive function has been used to support the differential account of male and female agency and justify male privilege. Other aspects of women’s embodiment, such as menstruation and menopause, have also been culturally interpreted as signs of women’s lack of control and discipline over their uncontrollable and unruly bodies. As Shildrick (1997) argued, “flesh-and-blood bodies, and their particular capacities and problems, were the mark of the feminine” (p. 36). Feminine thus became more associated with the body, irrationality, and emotion and masculine with the mind, control, and reason. The male body became the norm and the female body was seen as “abnormal,” fragile, and prone to failure and, as such, in need of monitoring and management. For example, during pregnancy the body considerably changes in shape and disturbs the notion of a uniform body with fixed bodily contours (Braidotti, 1994). It can be argued that this differential conception of embodiment underlies much of a biomedical approach to the study and “treatment” of female body and subjectivity. Deviations from “proper” (male) embodiment are pathologized and medicalized, i.e., treated as warranting the intervention of experts specializing in somatic matters (Davis & Walker, 2010).

While many bio-psychological perspectives tend to problematize women’s “leaky” bodies, feminists emphasize the role of language and culture in shaping how the body is “performed” day-to-day, interpreted, and responded to (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1993; Shildrick, 1997). They deconstruct the notion of the “natural” female body and challenge essentialist accounts of female body that present it as a fixed

biological entity with certain inherent and universal characteristics. For example, they question the idea that childbearing and caregiving are essential aspects of women’s biological makeup, and that it is unnatural for women to not desire or engage in these activities (Davis & Walker, 2010; Neiterman, 2012). Instead, feminist scholars focus on the body as socially constructed and explore how gender and other aspects of people’s social location (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, disability, age) are informed by and performed through socio-cultural practices. Some feminists challenge accounts that reduce the body to either material/biological or cultural factors. These writers do not deny materiality; rather, the body is seen as simultaneously constructed through cultural meanings and social categories and as constructive or shaping of such categories (e.g., Grosz, 1994; Shildrick, 1997).

Pregnant embodiment

Both scholarly and everyday conceptions of pregnancy in the West are largely based on medical and modernist explanations of embodiment discussed above (Davis & Walker, 2010). Most research on pregnancy has focused on socio-psychological aspects of pregnancy; the body has been examined peripherally or, alternatively, medicalized and essentialized (Martin, 1992; Ussher, 2006). For example, Smith and Lavender (2011) synthesized qualitative work in the area of pregnant embodiment in women distinguished as “obese” (i.e., whose body mass index was more than or equal 30 kg/m² prior to their pregnancies). They identified three clusters of themes across studies, namely acceptance and inevitability of weight gain during pregnancy, health care being less personalized, and benefits of healthy lifestyle for both the mother and baby. Overall, they concluded that pregnancy is an ideal time for health professionals to intervene to modify “unhealthy” bodily habits of pregnant women. Other studies examining pregnant embodiment (e.g., nutrition, exercise, body image) similarly approached this topic by attending to women’s lifestyle choice and, consequently, treating embodied experiences in a de-contextualized manner (Begum, Colman, McCargar, & Bell, 2012; Chen, Hu, Yeung, Willett, & Zhang, 2009; Skouteris, Carr, Wertheim, Paxton, & Duncombe, 2005). Some have argued that discourses of choice and self-expression can be used to neutralize and conceal practices of control and gender oppression (Davis & Walker, 2010; Foucault, 2003). Body projects like fitness may be experienced as personally empowering but can also conceal oppression of women—the everyday struggles women face concerning work/life balance, institutional and cultural constraints (e.g., parental leave), or medicalization of women’s bodies (Nash, 2011).

Nash (2011) discussed the competing cultural expectations placed on pregnant women: to be slim and toned while avoiding dieting or physical overexertion. Pregnant women are expected to perform “fit pregnancy” and are subjected to the same, though slightly relaxed (e.g., Bailey, 1999; Clark et al., 2009; Wiles, 1994), standards of fitness and beauty as non-pregnant women, despite bodily changes commonly accompanying childbearing. Such standards are established and maintained, in part, through media representations of pregnant elite athletes and celebrities who are portrayed as engaging in bodywork during pregnancy and as regaining their pre-pregnancy body shape quickly following birth (e.g., McGannon, Curtin, Schinke, &

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/375903>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/375903>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)