

Really Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Body: A Cultural Challenge

One of today's most pressing interdisciplinary tasks involves combining cultural and scientific research techniques in exploring the human condition. A focus on the body – seemingly, a scientific domain *par excellence* – provides a splendid way to illustrate the opportunities and challenges involved in this call for pushing out the boundaries of interdisciplinarity.

Let's take the case of fat bodies, certainly a topical issue, increasingly on a global scale as reports of rising obesity now include population segments in India and China as well as the industrial world with its American leader in girth. Three lines of scientific research, all winning substantial public attention, fruitfully explore the question of body fat. First, of course, is simply nutritional science – studying what kinds of foods, and in what quantities, have what effect on the body. This is an old subject, though constantly being refined. Second – and this kind of inquiry goes back over a century – scientific research treats the relationship between overweight and health – at an extreme, between overweight and premature mortality. There is room for dispute here, despite the long track record; experts disagree about how thin one should be, or about whether dieting is preferable to stability even at above-desirable weight levels. But there is unquestionably a valid research area. The third and final tack is more recent, in seeking genetic explanations for why some people gain more weight than others. Genetic science is trendy, exciting – and it holds some potential for remedy, for there is always the hope of manipulating genes toward beneficial individual results.

The limitation on all of the scientific inquiries toward body fat is that they fail, or partially fail, at three crucial explanatory tasks: first, why different groups have different weight experiences; second, why societies such as in the United States have seen such dramatic weight gains in the past two decades; and third, why abundant warnings about overweight have not produced behavioural changes comparable, for example, to the impact of cautions against cigarette smoking in recent years. To be sure, group variations may have something to do with genetic variations in body type. Change over time can be partly explained by shifts in the amount and nature of available food, combined with more sedentary life styles.

But the fact is that all three topics, vital to understanding why contemporary bodies are as they are, involve culture. Why, by the end of the 20th century, was the average French woman only about a third as likely as her average American counterpart to be obese? The answer has to do with profound differences in expectations about eating (how to define enjoyment, when to eat), plus notable differences in degrees of emphasis on aesthetic considerations as constraints on eating (with the French considerably more devoted to beauty as a criterion), plus considerable differences in approaches toward children and eating, with the French persuaded that children do not naturally make good decisions about eating and that adult supervision and restraint are essential. All of these differences in values and beliefs can be explained, through comparative and historical cultural analysis, and they are indispensable tools for social diagnosis and, potentially, remedy.

The same approach holds for the vital issue of change over time. Genetics may be invaluable for showing why, in a social context in which average weight gains are considerable, some individuals gain more than others – but they do not help explain the social context itself at all. For this, alterations in food availability – the infamous increase in the size of restaurant portions – are crucial, but so again is culture, in explaining why people accept the larger portions, why the role of eating shifts particularly from the 1980s onward.

The third point, on the ineffectiveness of campaigns against overeating, is intriguing, and oddly neglected. Marshalling scientific data about desirable bodies does not alone suffice. There has even been some fascinating counterthrust, based on other cultural values associated with civil rights and feminism, arguing that weight control campaigns are themselves a trap, particularly for women. Cultural analysis and, in this case, some cultural experiments seem essential if proponents of slimmer bodies are to win through.

The message seems obvious: while there is important research to be done in both the scientific and the cultural veins, neither approach by itself suffices around issues of bodies and obesity. Cultural issues offer intriguing analytical challenges and arguably outweigh – the word is used advisedly – the scientific issues in explaining why contemporary people are as they are and in establishing the bases for remedy.

Yet the problems are equally obvious: we have no established apparatus for collaboration among scientists and cultural analysts in dealing with topics like body weight. Funding sources are wildly disparate, with most cultural analysis operating with little or no funding at all, compared to the feasts available, say, to geneticists.

Similar challenges and complexities surround a host of other body topics, though the balance between physical and cultural assessments will vary somewhat from case to case. No one would dispense with medical and psychological research on the problem of anorexia nervosa, for example; but understanding why the disease is modern, and what the dynamics of family values were in initially causing it brings us straight back to cultural issues. The impact of ageing on the body is perhaps more heavily a scientific domain, but it has intriguing cultural angles as well, as assumptions change over time, for ageing individuals themselves and for groups reacting to the elderly. Modern emphasis on the centrality of gender in

understanding the body gives rise to massive scientific programs, but it is itself partly a cultural artefact, a context that warrants serious attention. And the list goes on. Whole fields, including the physical senses, or sexuality, or physical disabilities, now have rich cultural agendas to complement, sometimes to rival, their scientific counterparts. No full understanding of vision, for example, is possible without some grasp of the changes in vision's role, among all the senses, over the past two centuries.

But the fact remains that culture does not jump to the fore when most people – scholars or the general public – think about the body. We return to a central dilemma of contemporary interdisciplinary research, eerily evocative of the old and largely unrevised two cultures formula: the gap between the physical and the cultural, with its echoes in the gap between the (seemingly largely) quantitative and the (largely though not necessarily entirely) qualitative. Over the past two decades, not only in cultural studies *per se* but in cultural anthropology, the cultural branches of sociology, history and psychology, there have been vast gains in our knowledge of the nature and impact of culture in domains such as the body – but the larger resonance of these gains has fallen short.

Most scientists, even most psychologists, have brushed aside cultural findings, if they were aware of them at all. Biosociologists have asserted the primacy of inherent physical attributes more loudly than ever. No new sources of research funding have opened for cultural inquiry. And no larger curricular changes have marked a recognition that culture demands more systematic attention. In general education, culture still means great literature, or foreign language, or formal philosophy – all valid topics, but quite different from cultural analysis as practiced and available on topics such as the body. Nor has the list of academic majors significantly altered, with a few exceptions such as gender studies or cultural studies themselves. Certainly, when we think about interdisciplinarity, we more commonly turn to new combinations within the sciences – sometimes wedded to computation, as in computational neuroscience or bioinformatics – than to efforts to bridge the larger divide.

There are several reasons for the distressing gap between significant findings in cultural analysis and wider reception. Two key explanations are closely related: the self-indulgence of culturalists and the hostility of conservatives.

In terms of impact, as opposed to self-congratulation, many cultural-turn partisans have committed a number of blunders that have called their approach into question. Some have, quite simply, pressed the cultural case too hard, ignoring evidence of constant or 'natural' features in the human experience and disdaining scientific findings in the process. Efforts to describe certain illnesses as entirely culturally contracted can fall into this category.

More serious still has been a widespread addiction to exceedingly recondite postmodern theorizing that has created an often impenetrable in-group vocabulary while, at times, showing little interest in actual evidence.

Implications of relativism, inherent in the cultural approach to some degree, have often been presented too baldly or defiantly, distracting from solid findings. Few disciplines have really been converted to a sense that everything is in the eye of the beholder, yet grandiose

claims in that direction have, rightly or wrongly, alienated many potential allies. And some culturalists have taken such a delight in exploring particular subcultures, for example, where sexuality is concerned, that larger cultural standards have been underinvestigated or even ignored. A colleague recently pointed out to me a graduate student who was amazingly knowledgeable about cultural evidence for the values of various sexual minorities, but who knew nothing about either widely current standards or about actual sexual behaviours in the society he was studying.

For a variety of reasons, thus, it has been too easy for nonconverts to dismiss the cultural turn as radical self-indulgence.

In the United States, the cultural turn has also run afoul of political conservatism. In the hands of critics like Lynne Cheney, the valorisation of the nation as multicultural in the 1960s began to yield to an emphasis on a single inspiring national story in the 1980s. The central issue was conservative discomfort with exploration of cultural diversity at a time when growing immigration seemed to be making the discussion of core values imperative. Amid the din, findings about values and beliefs as sources of human behaviour could not overcome partisan objections.

The cultural turn, in other words, got caught up in the wider culture wars. Theory and jargon helped comfort culturalists amid growing conservatism, but those tendencies discouraged wider persuasion while goading conservative intolerance. And, while the culture wars may have softened, they are not over today, as new international crises have prompted reassertions of the need to rally around a national culture.

Most importantly, the sound and fury have distracted us from what should be the principal discussion: the place of cultural findings in an intellectual community that, particularly in the United States, has become excessively devoted to a scientism that tends to ignore culture.

The cultural turn has made no perceptible dent in our deeply rooted attitudes. Many social scientists still view cultural data as soft. Indeed, particularly in disciplines like psychology, which could serve as a bridge between the humanities and the social sciences by embracing both nature and nurture in their explorations of human behaviours, trivial but quantifiable projects – like those that endlessly count college students' reactions to this or that stimulus – easily qualify for funds over projects that explore larger questions with cultural data.

Even more: widespread assumptions of human uniformity across cultures, ultimately derived from the Enlightenment and deeply ingrained in disciplines like economics as well as the life sciences, readily prevail over attention to cultural causation. It is far easier, for example, to finance a project on uniform human facial expression (not least because of obvious relevance in military interrogation) than to find backing for studying cultural distinctions in emotional standards.

The presumably scientific approach has gained further impetus in recent years from the new passion for genetics, which, again, seems to dwarf attention to culture. There has been undeniable and important progress in genetic research in recent years. But there has

also been a tendency to claim too much for genes where behavioural changes are concerned. First, genes have a soothing way of limiting responsibility for one's actions. Cultures do not, since it is widely assumed that individuals should be able to rise above cultural constraints that are human creations. Second, there is the hope that genetic identification might lead to medical remedy (hopefully without much personal effort); but we are less certain about changing cultures.

The last uncertainty, however, leads back to the need to pay more attention to cultural analysis. Cultural factors are often altered, sometimes quite intentionally: eating habits of our culture can be changed, even if we have not yet hit on a successful formula. One of the reasons to urge the continued validity of culture research, in fact, involves our capacity to learn more about the process of deliberate cultural change than we currently know. Even prosaic examples, like the dramatic American shift toward disapproving of smoking and the reconfiguration of smokers as moral pariahs, provide evidence of change through what one might call culture management.

We need, therefore, to expand the cultural research agenda. Continued inquiry into what cultures cause, in terms of human and social behaviours, remains vital. Comparative work, domestic and international, has tremendous additional potential. We can also think about 'applied' cultural work, dealing with the explicit promotion of beneficial cultural change, and the kinds of methods that are most likely to be reliable, with the fewest unintended consequences.

Already, there are signs of how a new generation of work on culture can focus on central issues, even as we discuss moving beyond the cultural turn. There are several points here.

First: the range of aspects of human behaviour, including the body, being investigated through cultural analysis expands steadily. We have new work on the cultural understanding of sleep, an important new study of the elusive topic of masturbation, new inquiries on the cultural construction of boredom – to mention just a few examples.

Second: the complexities of the current global age call attention to cultural factors from another angle, requiring a new generation of comparative scholarship to explore what is involved in cultural differentiation. Recent surveys of the Islamic world, for example, reveal far more disagreement with the West on issues such as gender and sexuality, than on political systems directly. The range of cultural analysis, including attention to issues associated with the body, takes on additional significance.

Third: though haltingly, there are signs of greater discourse across the science-culture divide, around specific issues. A conference on addiction invites a researcher to talk about the origins and ongoing cultural functions of the addiction concept in the United States. Admittedly, the audience, bent on establishing the scientific basis for addiction while discussing treatment, is not quite sure what to do with the information, but at least a conversation is launched. A French program, largely staffed by nutritional scientists, invites another cultural researcher to talk about what comparative history suggests should be

done to avoid American obesity levels.

To be sure, more remains to be done to create a more dynamic and imaginative interdisciplinary climate around topics such as the body. We need more active work on the interaction between cultural and somatic causation. We need bolder curricular ventures that stake a clear place for cultural analysis, in a new interdisciplinary configuration that does not smother cultural explanations amid conventional bows to the humanities. At the same time, we need to encourage cultural-studies programs to move beyond their current isolation and to take more central roles in combining the disciplines that generate understanding of how cultures work.

Above all, while learning from the mistakes of cultural theory and jargon in the past, we need more researchers willing to ask what role culture plays, even when their own main interests lie in other explanations – and more cultural researchers interested in taking scientific findings more seriously. The challenge is exciting.

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