

Bodies of Knowledge—Knowledge of Bodies. Commentary on “Re-Constructing Women’s Experiences of Sexual Pain: The ‘Deviant’ Body as an Object of Cultural Psychological and Feminist Consideration.” (Julia Riegler)

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Interest in feminist critique of science and epistemological and methodological issues often arises from some dissatisfaction with one’s scientific discipline. Coming from different disciplines—psychology and sociology/social and political thought—Julia and I still seem to share much of this dissatisfaction with our discipline(ing). The bodily dimension of this disciplining is made apparent in Julia’s paper.

Julia and I are working together in a transdisciplinary project called *Criticizing science by politicizing epistemology and the body*.¹ So far, I have considered myself to be on the epistemology part of the project, not the body one. Despite the focus on the social situatedness of knowledge in my own work, I have not paid much attention to the embodiment of knowledge and the body as subject/object of knowledge production. Coming from the sociology of knowledge (in particular Mannheim) and feminist epistemologies, my interest was more on the sociological and feminist reconstruction of epistemology, that is on the social structures and cultural factors shaping knowledge production and on critical social theories capturing these. Obviously, I have not conceived of either the structures or the knowing subjects as embodied, even though I was familiar with Bourdieu’s concept of habitus. It is also due to Julia’s project that I became aware of this ‘rationalist fallacy’ which is significant in its own right.

As Julia tells us in her paper, the body has long been neglected by the social sciences as an *object* of interest, let alone as potential *subject* of knowledge production. Traditional epistemology still follows the Cartesian mind-body-dualism or postulates the ideal of “knowledge without subject” (Popper, 1973)—and hence without body. The implied model for the knowing subject in epistemology and for the researcher in the scientific field is the bourgeois white male, separate from the daily activities of (re)production and hence apparently capable of rising above nature and the body into the realm of culture—and knowledge, “committing” what Donna Haraway (1991, p. 189) calls the “god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere.” It is thus precisely the *ignorance* of the concrete material reality of everyday life, the alleged non-situatedness and disembodiment, only open to the ‘unmarked’ body/subject, which is assumed to lead to knowledge—an ignorance which is often called “objectivity,” as Lorraine Code (2007) maintains. This ignorance of the body as more than a ‘given’ *object* for natural scientific research may be considered part of the *illusio* of the scientific field: the belief that the

1 We are working on this project, funded by *Austrian Academy of Science*, together with Julia Hertlein and Nora Ruck, who is also contributing to this volume.

body is at most an irritation in knowledge production and that disembodied knowledge is not only possible, but also a qualification for objectivity. While criticizing the gendered Western dualisms of mind/body, culture/nature, rationality/emotionality etc. from a feminist perspective, I obviously got somewhat caught in the rationalist fallacy of epistemology and the *illusio* of the scientific field too.

What is needed, then, is an account of the body that does not take it as a given object of research or part of the material conditions for intellectual production, but as epistemologically relevant in its own right. Julia pursues such an account by turning to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. Bourdieu introduces the concept of habitus in order to overcome the opposition of subjectivism and objectivism or individual and society in the social sciences. The habitus is both *subject* and *object* of the social world, that is, it produces the social while always already and constantly being produced by it. The habitus is also *individual* and *social* at the same time, describing an individual's system of dispositions resulting from experiences that are always shaped by social structure (e.g. class, gender, or race). Since these experiences are incorporated, the habitus can be considered embodied history (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 193).

Comprising a social actor's schemes of perception, thought, and action (Bourdieu, 1993b, p. 101), the habitus both enables and sets limits to what we may know at all. Thus, like for Mannheim, one's social position is a necessary condition for the production of knowledge, and not something to be overcome. It is only because we are part of the social world that we can know it, both bodily and rationally. For we have acquired the necessary dispositions, schemes, and concepts in order to grasp the world in the everyday (what Bourdieu calls "practical knowledge") and to explain it rationally ("theoretical knowledge" for Bourdieu). However, theory and practice follow a different logic according to Bourdieu and it is only due to the "scholastic bias" (Bourdieu, 1993a, p. 371), i.e. the researcher's tendency to substitute her/his own way of thinking for the one of the social actor, that the difference between theory and practice is ignored. While the habitus is central on the level of everyday practices, generating—often unconsciously and unintentionally—everyday knowledge and actions, on the level of theoretical knowledge the habitus is rather an object of reflection. Thus, Bourdieu emphasizes the role of the body in the production of practical knowledge, but pays less attention to the epistemological potential of the body with regard to theoretical knowledge production or 'scientific practice.'

Julia and I have been discussing how the involvement of the knowing body as both subject and object in the research process may be accomplished. Instead of a theoretical answer, I will present some cursory ideas we have developed following an intensive team discussion of a case study based on one of Julia's interviews. At one point in our meeting, a debate arose regarding Julia's style of representation. To us, Julia seemed somewhat irritated by the interviewee. When confronted with our impression, Julia first denied having any such feelings. She then found that she actually had been impatient and annoyed because she felt that the interviewee had kept her at distance by persistently presenting her own theories about her experiences. Julia's feelings are instructive for the dynamic of the relationship between the interviewee and Julia, which does not necessarily show on a verbal level. Obviously, the interviewee did not follow the structure of a narrative which Julia was (methodologically) expecting. This may be interpreted as a resistant act: a refusal of compliance that is not articulated explicitly. Of

course, a sophisticated and careful interpretation is needed—and will certainly be accomplished by Julia—in order to analyse in what way the relationship between the interviewee and Julia may be significant for other relationships of the interviewee, in particular her often painfully experienced heterosexual relationships. The point I would like to make is that the bodily and affective responses of both researcher and interviewee are epistemologically significant for the production of knowledge. Hence we must consider the knowing body and the affective dimension of knowledge—not only with regard to the research(ed) subjects (the women feeling the pain), but also with regard to another knowing subject: the researcher.

One may conclude that considering the knowing body as epistemological agent simply requires reflecting on one's body—posture, affects, feelings, etc.—in the research process, for instance in one's research diary (see for example Werlhoff, 1984). While this may be an important step, it is not sufficient in order to analyse the operating of the habitus (or the knowing body), which is often unconscious and unintentional and not simply available to us. Following Bourdieu's praxeological approach, as it is taken up by Julia, we thus have to consider the habitus or the knowing body with regard to the different logic of theory and practice. I would argue that conducting an interview—in the best case—follows both a theoretical and a practical logic with the researcher getting involved as actor in the social world and as researcher in the scientific field. Thus the researcher also employs "atheoretical, implicit knowledge," as Julia calls it, in her/his own research. The implicit knowledge, then, is not necessarily available to the researcher either. Therefore, reflection on the habitus—and the body as epistemic agent—cannot be an individual business. This would precisely replicate the methodological individualism which Julia criticizes on another level. That is why for Bourdieu (1993a, p. 366) the *scientific field* has to be turned into subject and object of reflexive analysis. How this may be accomplished practically is another question. In our case, it was due to our transdisciplinary team that we managed to establish a site for meta-theoretical discussion and reflection, a site in which Julia's affective responses and feelings as a researcher could be discussed. Perhaps this site of reflection constitutes one of the epistemological and methodological advantages of transdisciplinary research teams.

After pointing out how Julia's research addresses epistemological and methodological questions concerning the role of the body as subject/object of knowledge, which are instructive for my own work in philosophy of social science, I will shortly turn to the overall theme of Julia's paper: the construction of a scientific subject/object and the symbolic and epistemic power (and sometimes violence) involved in this process. In this context, Julia puts forward a critique of the epistemological and methodological foundations of mainstream psychology and its natural scientific research paradigm, focussing in particular on the problems of reification and methodological individualism.

By "reification" Julia refers to a process of turning social phenomena into 'things,' abstracting them from the concrete social relations in which they are actually produced. Concepts or scientific abstractions are thus treated as reality 'out there,' as something actually existing. I think the concept of reification gains critical impact if we take into account the historical context and critical intention of its formulation. The concept of reification was developed by Marx (MEW 23) with regard to the commodity form and in particular spelled out by Georg Lukács (1923), who was also influential for the

development of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. Marx introduced the notion of reification with regard to political economy and as a critique of a particular common sense and scientific method of reasoning, reifying social relations and attributing them to things (like value as a result of human labour in particular relations of production is regarded as a quality of the commodity itself). Thus there is an inversion of subject and object involved in reification. Despite being the product of our (practical or intellectual) activities, the reified 'thing'—e.g., a scientific concept like *'dyspareunia'*—seems to gain autonomous existence and power over our lives. Thus *'dyspareunia'* appears as something—a medical condition, a defect—affecting women and not as a product of social relations and practices. This process of reification may be linked to the tautological principle of explanation involved in the analysis of any abnormality, according to Foucault (1975, p. 78): Women then simply suffer pain in heterosexual intercourse because they have *dyspareunia*.

Medical and psychological diagnoses can thus be understood as reifying theories and practices that are inscribed in the body and, as a consequence, part of a subject's knowledge and practices. It has to be emphasized, therefore, that the habitus or the knowing body in itself does not provide any more 'authentic' or 'immediate' knowledge, but rather constitutes the methodological starting point for analysing how the phenomenon in question, e.g. sexual pain, is (re)produced on an everyday basis and the social relations and structures involved in this (re)production.

It is no coincidence that reification and methodological individualism are appearing together in mainstream psychology, for they are both disregarding social relations. Hence, mainstream psychology's 'two core epistemological prejudices' identified by Julia are linked to one 'ontological ignorance': the ignorance of social relations linked to an atomistic understanding the social. In this regard, Bourdieu's relational sociology evident in his concept of habitus and to feminist theories are productive approaches if one, like Julia, takes the challenge of criticizing *The Conceptual Practices of Power* (Smith, 1990) involved in mainstream psychology's treatment of (women's) bodies.

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