

Drawing the body in sociology

Earlier in this chapter I spoke of the dual status of the body in sociology, and sought to illustrate this status by referring to the precarious place of the body in much contemporary and classical sociology. I then described some of the social and academic factors which have highlighted the importance of the body in contemporary society. The range of these factors suggests that there are many books which could be written on the body in sociology. For example, the social construction of gendered bodies, body images, the body in medicine, the ways in which biology and culture interrelate in the reproduction and development of human bodies, and the body in consumer culture, all warrant major studies in their own right. My aim in the next few chapters of this book though, is to provide a fairly broad, critical overview of some of the most important and interesting approaches which are relevant to the sociological study of the body. I hope this will provide a number of contexts in which the recent proliferation of studies on this subject can be located, and a basis on which we can develop a more adequate approach towards conceptualizing the body and its position within, and relationship to, society.

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The Naturalistic Body

The body may have been something of an absent presence in sociology, but it has occupied a position of far greater centrality in other traditions of social and popular thought. In this respect, *naturalistic* views of the body have, since the eighteenth century, exerted a considerable influence on how people have perceived the relationship between the body, self-identity and society. Naturalistic views are not identical, but they deserve to be seen as a coherent approach as they share an analysis of the body which views it as the pre-social, biological basis on which the superstructures of the self and society are founded.

Naturalistic views hold that the capabilities and constraints of human bodies define individuals, and generate the social, political and economic relations which characterize national and international patterns of living. Inequalities in material wealth, legal rights and political power are not socially constructed, contingent and reversible, but are given, or at the very least legitimized, by the determining power of the biological body.

The naturalistic approach continues to shape popular contemporary conceptions of the body and this is especially apparent in the view that gender inequalities are the direct result of women's 'weak' and 'unstable' bodies. Naturalistic views have also influenced how sociologists have conceptualized and analysed the human body. This has mainly been a negative influence, as sociologists have tended to react against the methods adopted by naturalistic views. However, one influential strand of contemporary feminism has forged its own radically innovative view of the origin and maintenance of patriarchy by maintaining the methodological orientation of the naturalistic approach (O'Brien, 1981). In the introduction to this book I stated that as well as describing and assessing different perspectives on the body, I would be taking from each what I considered to be most useful in building towards the outlines of a distinctive approach to the body. Now, an approach that reduces the complexities of social relationships and inequalities to an unchanging, pre-social body seems hardly to be fruitful ground from a sociological viewpoint. However, naturalistic views at least take seriously the idea that human bodies form a basis for, and contribute towards, social relationships. This is especially the case for the feminist variants I shall be examining later on in this chapter. Naturalistic views undoubtedly overstate the importance of, and draw all sorts of unwarranted conclusions from, what they hold to be 'natural' in the human body. Nonetheless, if sociology is to grasp the full importance of the body

for social systems, it does need to take into account the contribution that bodies make to social relations.

In what follows I shall look at several examples of the naturalistic approach and will pay particular attention to how sex differences have been justified with reference to the body. Before describing and assessing specific examples of this approach, though, it is important to trace the emergence of naturalistic views of the body. The view that the biological body constitutes the basis of society, and social inequalities, emerged at a particular historical period and was associated with specific social interests. Historians of the body have illustrated this particularly well in relation to the subject of sex differences.

The emergence of natural bodies

Thomas Laqueur (1987, 1990) has argued that the human body tended until the eighteenth century to be perceived as an ungendered, generic body. The male body was considered the norm, but the female body had all the parts of the male; they were simply arranged in a different and inferior pattern (Duroche, 1990). For hundreds of years it had been generally accepted that women had the same genitals as men, except that theirs were inside the body and not outside it. The vagina was imagined to be an interior penis, the labia a foreskin, the uterus a scrotum, and the ovaries were seen as interior testicles. It was also believed that women emitted sperm (Laqueur, 1990).

This 'one sex/one flesh' model dominated thinking about sexual differences from classical antiquity to the end of the seventeenth century. Women were considered to be the inferior of men, but their inferiorities did not inhere in any specific, permanent or stable way within their bodies. Bodies were important but, unlike their portrayal in later, naturalistic views, they were seen as receptors as much as generators of social meanings:

the paradox of the one sex model is that pairs of ordered contraries played off a single flesh in which they did not themselves inhere. Fatherhood/motherhood, male/female, culture/nature, masculine/feminine, honorable/dishonorable, legitimate/illegitimate, hot/cold, right/left, and many other pairs were read into a body that did not itself mark these distinctions clearly. Order and hierarchy were imposed upon it from the outside. The one sex body, because it was concerned as illustrative rather than determinant, could therefore register and absorb any number of shifts in the axes and valuations of difference. Historically, differentiations of gender preceded differentiations of sex. (Laqueur, 1990: 601)

As Ludmilla Jordanova (1989) argues, it is commonly supposed that the distinction between culture and nature is a straightforward and stable division which has been used to define the separate identities and roles of male and female bodies. The conditions of women's embodiment were ruled by natural cycles associated with pregnancy, childbirth and menstruation. In contrast, men's embodiment allowed their minds a greater degree

of freedom. This permitted them to engage in the sphere of culture. However, as the quotation illustrates, the scope and precise meaning of the culture/nature divide has, in fact, been historically dynamic. While gender divisions were perceived as natural before the eighteenth century, neither the content nor the boundaries of these divisions were wholly stable and did not correspond to simple biological correlates.

Laqueur (1990) illustrates this situation by looking at sex differences during the Renaissance. While there were at least two 'social sexes' during the Renaissance, with radically different rights and obligations, the human body was insufficiently demarcated to act as an exclusive ontological support for these divisions. In the usual course of events these social sexes were maintained by the unproblematic process of identifying a baby as a female or male. Humans with an external penis were declared to be boys and were allowed the privileges of that status, while those with only an internal penis were assigned to the inferior category of girl. However, changes in corporeal structures could push a body from one juridical category (female) to another (male). This was because these categories 'were based on gender distinctions – active/passive, hot/cold, formed/unformed, informing/formable – of which an external or an internal penis was only the diagnostic sign' (Laqueur, 1990: 135, emphasis added).

Naturalistic views were not, then, dominant in the period prior to the eighteenth century. Instead of the social position of women and men being determined by their respective biologies, whatever one thought about women and their rightful place in the world could, apparently, be understood in terms of bodies permanently open to the 'interpretive demands of culture' (Laqueur, 1990). However, a revolutionary shift took place sometime during the eighteenth century which substituted 'an anatomy and physiology of incommensurability' for the existing model of social difference based on homologies between male and female reproductive systems (Duroche, 1990; Laqueur, 1987). During the eighteenth century, science began to flesh out the categories of 'male' and 'female' and base them upon biological differences. This was accompanied by the development in the late eighteenth century of the notion of 'sexuality' as a singular and all-important human attribute which gave one a self-identity which was firmly contrasted with the *opposite* sex (Laqueur, 1990: 13).

As Laqueur (1987) and other historians of the body have noted, this radical shift in the conceptualization of women's and men's bodies had much to do with one of the great dilemmas of Enlightenment egalitarianism. The model of the human body the Enlightenment had inherited from antiquity caused the problem of how – given Enlightenment beliefs in universal, inalienable and equal rights – the real world of male domination over women could be derived from an original state of genderless bodies. The dilemma 'at least for theorists interested in the subordination of women, is resolved by grounding the social and cultural differentiation of the sexes in a biology of incommensurability' (Laqueur, 1987: 19). In short, a naturalistic reinterpretation of women's bodies was made to solve some of

the ideological problems involved in justifying inequality in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gender relations (Gallagher and Laqueur, 1987).

The geography of bodies and their precise composition became increasingly important with the progress of science in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Furthermore, from being a *manifestation* of self-identity and difference, the body was viewed increasingly as the very *basis* of human identity and social divisions. During the eighteenth century, it gradually became taken for granted that the body provided access to uncontested knowledge about both individuals and society. There was in particular an obsession with the female body, as a living, fleshy phenomenon, as a corpse and as a skeleton (Jordanova, 1989; Schiebinger, 1987). The results of this obsession were used to provide a biological basis for women's social inferiority.

'Women's troubles'

Historically, the position of women in society has been undermined repeatedly by attempts to define their 'unstable' bodies as both dominating and threatening their 'fragile' minds. The seventeenth-century claims of Hobbes and Locke, and the French revolution, questioned the certainty of the natural, male-dominated, social order. However, the development of the social and natural sciences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was employed to reassert the superiority of men and the inevitability of female subordination in public and private life (Martin, 1989 [1987]: 32). In short, to be embodied as a woman was to have a body and mind which were unable to withstand the rigours of physical and mental exertion.

These arguments about the physical frailty of women were brought together and crystallized into a model of health and illness in the eighteenth century which held that lifestyle and social position were closely related to a person's bodily capacities. The lesson drawn from this model was that women's bodies made them fit only for the production and care of children and the 'creation of a natural morality through family life' (Jordanova, 1989: 26).

At the onset of the nineteenth century an increased division was made between the structure and functioning of women's and men's bodies. This involved a characterization of women's bodies as pathological. For example, from being a natural and healthy process with analogues in men (in the form of blood letting), menstruation became something likely to cause disease among women. Women's behaviour was also seen to be governed by menstruation, a view which was incorporated into the very functioning of the state. For example, in 1896 an American woman was released from the charge of shop-lifting on the grounds that she was suffering from kleptomania, a condition later traced back to the effects of 'suppressed menstruation' (Shuttleworth, 1990).

Historically there have been clear links between women's attempts to gain civil, political and social rights on the one hand, and renewed interest in theories that confirm women's embodiment as biologically inferior on the other. Susan Barrows (1981) has illustrated how fears related to the Paris Commune and the political possibilities opened up by the Third Republic stimulated an elaborate physical anthropology of sexual difference which was used to legitimize the status quo. Similar responses came from those opposing the women's suffrage movement in Britain. Furthermore, when women began to campaign for entrance rights to universities, attempts to exclude them focused around the Darwinian theory of the evolution of sex differences (Fedigan, 1992; Kaplan and Rogers, 1990: 206). One of the issues raised by opponents of women's entry concerned the size and capacity of female brains. In France, Gustave Le Bon (a founder of psychology and an exponent of craniometry) measured thirteen skulls in total in order to feel able to conclude in 1879 that women:

represent the most inferior forms of human evolution and that they are closer to children and savages than to an adult, civilized man. . . . A desire to give them the same education, and, as a consequence to propose the same goals for them, is a dangerous chimera. (Gustave Le Bon, quoted in Gould, 1981: 104-5)

A related argument concerned the damaging consequences that overtaxing the brain would have on women's reproductive ability. Writers on education during the nineteenth century were frequently concerned to promote the view that intense or prolonged intellectual activity among women would lead to specific gynaecological disorders and the general deterioration of health. As women's natural vocation involved bearing children, it followed that the world of academia should remain a male preserve. John Richardson (1991) points out that this view continued to inform educational reports in the twentieth century. For example, a 1923 report from the Board of Education in England made the following claim:

The periodic disturbances, to which girls and women are constitutionally subject, condemn many of them to a recurring, if temporary, diminution of general mental efficiency. Moreover, it is during the most important years of school life that these disturbances are most intense and pervasive, and whenever one of them coincides with some emergency, for example, an examination, girls are heavily handicapped as compared with boys. (Board of Education, 1923: 86)

It would be wrong to give the impression that attempts to define women's bodies as inferior to men's were without opposition. For example, there were some positive views of women's menstruation in the nineteenth century which portrayed it as a healthy process (Martin, 1989 [1987]). It is also the case that not all attempts to define women's bodies as inferior relied on a simple opposition between male and female. Anthropologists have identified a long tradition of men *appropriating* women's energy and fertility, rather than defining themselves in opposition to it, and these practices continued in Western scientific and medical discourse of the

nineteenth century (Heritier-Auge, 1989). For example, in 1823 Julien Virey wrote that it is the energy of sperm which *activates* women's functions and provides married women with their self-assurance and boldness (Virey, 1823). Women's natural sensitivity makes them both biologically suited to the care of children but also subject to dangerous passions which overrule the reason of the mind. Both of these states are governed by men, as sperm is seen to be responsible for the production of children and the stimulation of 'immoral desires'. Consequently, women's proper place is one of submission within the family.

Despite the inconsistencies in this argument, women's fragility and instability are viewed as both activated and safeguarded by men. It is not that women's and men's bodies simply occupy opposite poles in nature but, in a theory which both echoes and expands on the biblical tale of Adam and Eve, that men are instrumental in allowing women to lead an embodied life.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the medical profession presided over an increasing medicalization of women's bodies which established ever stronger boundaries between the bodies of men and women in the sphere of waged work, sexuality, leisure and sport (Mangan and Park, 1987). The practical effects of this medicalization were, though, largely confined to the middle classes. Men, women and children of the working classes often laboured together in similar circumstances with no regard being paid to the 'special' corporeal needs of women for rest and relaxation.

Two related features tend to be prominent in explanations of why theories equating women's bodies with 'pathological nature' and the private sphere of life became increasingly popular in the nineteenth century. These concern the growing impact of industrial change on middle class men's positions of privilege and security, and the increasing influence of economic metaphors in understanding social and natural life.

First, the rapid economic changes of the nineteenth century gave rise to fears among men that they were no longer in control of their own destiny (Shuttleworth, 1990). The growing scale of industrial operations and the pace of economic change appeared to threaten the stability of social life and reduce the importance of the individual in the productive process. Naturalistic views of the human body, bolted on to existing gender divisions in society, served to transplant fears of economic chaos away from the minds of men and on to the biological bodies of women:

Notions of gender differentiation fulfilled the ideological role of allowing the male sex to renew their faith in personal autonomy and control. Unlike women, men were not prey to the forces of the body, the unsteady oscillations of which mirrored the uncertain flux of social circulation; rather, they were their own masters – not automatons or mindless parts of the social machinery, but self-willed individuals, living incarnations of the rational individualists and self-made men of economic theory. The disruptive social forces that had to be so decisively channelled and regulated to ensure mastery and controlled circulation in the economic sphere were metonymically

represented, however, in the domestic realm, in the internal bodily processes of the women in the home. (Shuttleworth, 1990: 55)

Second, the scope and pace of economic change in the nineteenth century also provided an increasing stock of metaphors which were used by the dominant in society to understand and explain social and natural life. For example, Susan Sontag (1979) has argued that medical ideas about illnesses such as tuberculosis were informed by attitudes associated with early capitalist accumulation. Energy, like savings, could be depleted through reckless and non-productive expenditure. In the case of gender differences, menstruation came to be seen as 'production gone awry', which was a threat to the 'natural' gender order. As Emily Martin (1989 [1987]: 47) suggests, women can be seen as dangerous and threatening to men when they menstruate. They are 'not reproducing, not continuing the species, not preparing to stay at home with the baby, not preparing a safe, warm womb to nurture a man's sperm'.

The practice of defining women's bodies as different from, and inferior to, the bodies of men as a result of their reproductive functions was still common in the second half of the twentieth century. The 1960s was a period when women increasingly demanded the opportunity to enter leadership positions in the business world. At the same time, medical and lay theories built on their nineteenth-century antecedents by arguing that women's behaviour was controlled by their hormones and that during periods of pre-menstrual tension they became emotionally and intellectually erratic, unreliable and 'out of control' (Dalton, 1979). Such arguments were used to safeguard men's occupational privileges. For example, they were employed in Australia by airline companies to prevent women becoming pilots, and also prevented women becoming bank managers in the United States (Kaplan and Rogers, 1990).

Sociobiology

A number of contemporary explanations of gender inequalities still argue that women's social position is derived from the reproductive functions of their bodies. Since the nineteenth-century elaboration of sexual difference, however, genetic theories have provided an additional method of defining the embodiment of women as inferior to that of men.

The development of genetic theories of women's inferiority coincided with the economic crisis of the early 1970s, and the rise of the women's movement in the late 1960s and 1970s. The most influential theories of women's inferiority around this time came collectively to be known as sociobiology. Sociobiology was initially developed at Harvard University in the 1970s and tried to establish a biological basis for human behaviour. However, it quickly became an influential contemporary version of Darwinian evolutionism regarding sex differences (Grosz and Lepervanche, 1988). Part of the reason for its rapid growth in popularity was that by

explaining social inequalities as an inevitable consequence of natural, genetic foundations, sociobiology not only justified the status quo but lent itself to being incorporated within conservative ideologies (Rogers, 1988).

Conservative ideologies were opposed to the growth of state intervention and welfare services which had taken place since the Second World War, and became increasingly popular as economic crisis in the early 1970s suggested that such interventionism was ineffective. As the 1970s progressed, elements of sociobiology were used by the neo-conservative and neo-liberal strands of the 'new right' in both the United States and the UK. They helped these rising political groupings – later to find power through the leadership of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher – to justify competition, patriarchy, heterosexuality and the nuclear family as both natural and desirable. In justifying the status quo, sociobiology proved especially flexible. Genes were 'found' for aggression, territoriality, intelligence and male dominance. It was now the genetic constitution of bodies which acted as the base on which the market and patriarchal order arose as the natural and unchangeable superstructure.

The basic unit of explanation in sociobiology is the gene. Genes, the hereditary material inside the nucleus of each cell, determine simple physical traits such as an individual's hair colour and blood group. More complex characteristics, such as the 'personality' of an individual, do not rely on the action of single genes and cannot be explained merely with reference to them. However, the logic of sociobiology does precisely this. The effect of sociobiological argument is to justify simplistic social categories on the basis that they are both natural and desirable. They are natural because the determinants of social behaviour are traced to the structure of genes. As such, unitary natural causes are found for highly complex social events. Genes are posited as the ultimate causal factor for any pattern of behaviour or social event in the world (Kaplan and Rogers, 1990). So, sociobiologists have argued that there are genes for homosexuality, conformity and even, perhaps, for upward mobility. It has also been argued that genes affect the timing of such events as someone's first sexual experience (Gregory, 1978; Wilson, 1975).

As well as being natural, dominant social categories and relations are seen as desirable. Sociobiologists adapt Darwin's theory of natural selection to argue that those genes which produce individual features and social structures best suited for survival live on in subsequent generations. Consequently, the dominant features of society are desirable *irrespective* of whether they are characterized by gross inequalities and the oppression of minority groups. Furthermore, political attempts to alter these structures are deeply misguided and dangerous. By working against human nature they are both harmful and doomed to fail. As Connell (1987) notes, society is epiphenomenal to nature. It either registers what nature decrees or 'gets sick' in the process.

In the specific case of sex differences, genes are said to cause male/female differences through their impact on the sex hormones which act on the

brain (Bleier, 1984; Caplan, 1978; Rogers, 1988). As sex differences are determined by genes, sociobiologists question the validity of feminist demands for change (Buffery and Gray, 1972; Tiger and Fox, 1978; Trivers, 1978; Wilson, 1975). For example, according to Wilson (1975), divisions between the sexes are determined by biology and are great enough to cause a substantial division of labour even in the most egalitarian of societies. Consequently, there is no logical basis on which these differences can be opposed or resisted (Kaplan and Rogers, 1990).

This focus on genes serves to dissolve both human behaviour and social structures as emergent *social* phenomena. It also makes the social sciences entirely dependent on and subservient to the natural sciences. Perhaps the best example of this can be found in Richard Dawkins's *The Selfish Gene*. According to Dawkins, 'individuals are not stable things; they are fleeting' phenomena whose main purpose is to act as 'survival machines' for genes. Human beings and their behaviour have been described in various ways by the social sciences, but such theories hide from view, and neglect the importance of, the real *genetic* motor force of history.

[The gene] leaps from body to body down the generations, manipulating body after body in its own way and for its own ends, abandoning a succession of mortal bodies before they sink in senility and death. . . . The genes are the immortals . . . individuals and groups are like clouds in the sky or dust-storms in the desert. (Dawkins, 1976: 36)

Individuals are like robots controlled by forces beyond their reach. Human behaviour and social interaction are explained in terms of the costs, benefits and even strategies of genes engaged in a competitive struggle for survival. Put simply, there is no need to look to social structures as determinants of human behaviour as there is no such thing as emergent *social* structures. For example, sex differences in human mating behaviour can be explained solely in terms of the interests genes have in maximizing their chances of survival. In humans and animals the female is said to invest a greater biological cost in reproduction than does the male. She must bear and nurture the offspring and these costs are best safeguarded by finding a reliable male partner to assist in raising the offspring. However, reproduction has little cost for the male and he has 'everything to gain from as many promiscuous matings as he can snatch' (Dawkins, 1976: 176). Sociobiologists argue that these very different strategies are adopted as they maximize the chances of genes being passed on in future generations.

This view of natural selection has been used to explain an increasing number of human traits. For example, Ardrey (1976) argues that the female orgasm developed as a way of stimulating female desire in order to guarantee that men would return from hunting trips. Alexander (1974) suggests that the menopause may have evolved because women reach an age at which it is more efficient for them to stop reproducing and concentrate on caring for existing children. Morris (1969) has argued that the

reason women have 'permanently enlarged breasts' is as a signal of sexual attractiveness. Gallup (1982) argues that breasts developed as an advertisement for ovulatory potential and to compensate for the fact that ovulation is concealed in humans (Kaplan and Rogers, 1990). If successful, these corporeal advertisements increase the chances of females finding a mate and improve the possibilities of her genes living on in another body.

Having briefly described the main features of sociobiological explanations, it is important to examine the flaws in this influential approach to the significance of the body in society. Critics of sociobiology sometimes take for granted that this form of explanation adopts *biological* methods which, they argue, are unsuitable for the investigation of *social* phenomena. However, as Connell (1987) points out, this credits sociobiology with an unwarranted scientific status. Sociobiology is pseudo-biological as it does not rest on serious biological investigation of human social life (see also Benton, 1991).

Despite its claim to scientific explanation, sociobiology cannot produce for inspection the mechanisms of biological causation on which its theories rest (Connell, 1987: 69). When sociobiology does deal in quantifiable phenomena, it makes unjustified generalizations and unwarranted leaps between levels of analysis. For example, in *The Inevitability of Patriarchy* (1973), Goldberg slides from using findings which identify *average* differences in hormonal levels between men and women, to statements about *categorical* differences in social behaviour between the sexes. This approach exaggerates differences and downplays the common capacities, such as language, shared by the sexes. As Connell (1987: 71) argues, the idea that 'differences in hormone levels reach out through the complex situational, personal and collective determinants of individual behaviour to remain the ultimate determinants of its social consequences, supposes a mechanism of hormonal control far more powerful than physiological research has actually found'.

Instead of resting on serious scientific explanation, sociobiology begins with an interpretation of current social life – which is often sexist, ethnocentric and factually wrong in other ways – and projects this back on to a mythical history of human societies. Processes of natural selection are then posited in order to justify these social arrangements as both natural and desirable (Connell, 1987: 68).

Sociology may traditionally have adopted a partial view of human agents by focusing on the cognitive aspects of embodiment. However, while sociobiology has refocused on the body, or certain components of the body, it also provides a partial view of human beings by reducing us to our genes. Furthermore, while sociobiology makes assumptions about the relationship between the body and society, it is unable to provide any mechanisms which would account for the collective structuring of human life and social institutions, or the likely direction of social change. As Washburn (1978) argues, by 'investigating human behaviour with the questions and

techniques suitable for animals with very simple nervous systems, the whole nature of human behaviour is lost'.

In terms of sex differences in behaviour, sociobiology faces an additional criticism which calls into question its efforts to explain the biological constitution of social life. This concerns the validity of the categories 'male' and 'female' on which sociobiological explanations are based. Kaplan and Rogers (1990), Stanley (1984) and Birke (1992) all provide useful summaries of the problems involved in dividing people permanently into the two mutually exclusive categories of male and female.

Newly-born children are usually assigned to one sex or another on the basis of whether a penis is present at birth. A penis is usually present when the genetic material is XY (male) and absent when it is XX (female). In adolescence, primary and secondary sexual characteristics develop in response to hormonal changes which are governed by the XY or XX genotype. However, sexual characteristics can also be influenced by environmental factors such as nutrition and stress. Moreover, the genetic make-up of individuals is not exclusively divided into XY and XX as a range of other genetic varieties exist. For example, XO is characterized as an underdeveloped female as no sex hormones are produced. XYY and XXY are two further genetic types labelled as males. Other considerations, such as testicular feminizing syndrome, add further complications to the picture. In testicular feminizing syndrome the cells of the body fail to respond to testosterone and do not differentiate into a male pattern even though the genotype is XY and male sex hormones are released. Such individuals are genetically male but appear to be female even though they cannot reproduce (Kaplan and Rogers, 1990: 212–13).

Sex hormones are also categorized as male and female. Oestrogen and progesterone are referred to as 'female' sex hormones and testosterone as the 'male' sex hormone. However, females also release testosterone from the adrenal gland, and males also release oestrogen from the testes. So, there is a considerable overlap between the sexes, and environmental factors can also alter the degree of this overlap.

Differences between the sexes become even more minimal in the case of brain functioning. There is no direct one-way influence of the hormones on the brain and environmental factors have again been shown to have an important influence on its operation (Kaplan and Rogers, 1990: 213–17). As Lynda Birke (1992: 99) concludes, when it comes to sex differences in brain functioning, 'the mass of inferences and assumptions far outweighs that of clear evidence'.

Given the great variety of genetic types and hormonal conditions which characterize individuals, it is impossible to classify accurately all humans into the restrictive categories of male or female. Indeed, Gisela Kaplan and Lesley Rogers argue that there are no biological phenomena which can properly be organized according to this bipolar dichotomy, and conclude that the 'rigid either/or assignment of the sexes is only a convenient social construct, not a biological reality' (1990: 214). Birke (1992) supplements

this conclusion by demonstrating how certain sex differences change over the human life course, and how others are culturally specific and can be eliminated even within a culture by physical and mental training.

Kaplan and Rogers's discussion is extended by Liz Stanley (1984) who, as well as providing an interesting discussion of intersexuality (cases where someone's assumed sex and one or more of their biological sex characteristics do not match), highlights anthropological data which attest to the seemingly endless variety of ways in which societies classify people as women and men. In relation to this, she cites Margaret Mead's *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1963 [1935]), which describes three cultures existing in close proximity to each other, but each having very different ideas of what it is to be a woman or a man.

One particularly interesting discussion of anthropological work, which reveals the inadequacy of conventional definitions of sex which posit universal and unchanging divisions between women and men, is Françoise Heritier-Auge's (1989) article on male domination and the appropriation of women's fertility. It is worth quoting from at length:

among the Nuer of East Africa, a woman recognized as sterile, which is to say one who has married and remained childless a certain number of years (until menopause, perhaps?), returns to her own family, where from then on she is considered as a man – 'brother' to her brothers, paternal 'uncle' to her brothers' children. As an 'uncle' she will be in a position to build up a herd, just like a man, from her share of the cattle paid as a bride price on her nieces. With the herd and the fruits of her personal industry, she will in turn be able to pay the bride price for one of several wives. She enters into these institutionalized matrimonial relations as the 'husband'. Her wives wait on her, work for her, honor her, show her the courtesies due a husband. She hires a servant of another ethnic group, usually a Dinka, of whom she demands services including sexual services for her wife or wives. (Heritier-Auge, 1989: 294)

Heritier-Auge argues that among the Nuer it is evident that the sterile woman is not or is no longer a 'woman' properly speaking. She is clearly considered more of a man than a woman. Consequently, in this society it is purely the capacity for fertility that constitutes the difference between male and female.

Despite such biological and anthropological evidence, the simplistic once and for all either/or consignment of individuals to the categories of male/female continues to influence biological and medical thinking. For example, medical models of appropriate behaviour patterns often differ for women and men. While a man may be described as angry or aggressive, the same behaviour in women may be redefined as hysteria or 'nervous disorder' and be seen as in need of correction. This explanation is certainly consistent with the much higher number of prescriptions women receive for drugs in comparison with men (Miles, 1987).

Grosz and Lepervanche (1988) argue that the biological and medical sciences still frequently compare women to male norms which are taken as universal. Some texts, such as Gray's *Anatomy*, unselfconsciously represent

the general case of every feature as male. The female body is illustrated only to show how it differs from the male. As Grosz and Lepervanche note: 'Judged in these terms, women's bodies can only be regarded as anomalous, imperfect and in need of explanation whereas men's bodies are taken for granted as adequate representatives of "human" attributes' (1988: 12).

There have been repeated attempts to limit women's civil, social and political rights by taking the male body, however defined, as 'complete' and the norm and by defining women as different and inferior as a result of their unstable bodies. Women were supposedly confined by their biological limitations to the private sphere, while only men were corporeally fit for participating in public life. However, it is not only gender that has served as a principal means of differentiating bodies and limiting women to the pre-social sphere of nature. The naturalistic view of the body has also made frequent appearances in attempts to legitimize the subordination and oppression of black peoples.

Dangerous 'others'

The historical construction of masculinity and femininity in the West has been intimately bound up not only with the body, but with *Christian* notions of the body. In Christianity, the body is seen as weak and sinful and in need of strict control and regulation by the mind (Brown, 1988). Flesh, sexuality and emotionality are all seen as potentially uncontrollable forces which are a source of great anxiety.

These attitudes were especially prominent during the Protestant Reformation in England. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, English Christianity focused on personal piety, individual judgement, self-control and self-scrutiny. Winthrop Jordan (1982: 56) argues that it was in this context of self-discovery that Englishmen used peoples from overseas as 'social mirrors', and were inclined to discover attributes in 'savages which they found first, but could not speak of, in themselves'.

Instead of individualizing and internalizing their fears of the flesh, Englishmen have historically dealt with this anxiety by projecting it on to the bodies not only of black men, but of womenkind as a whole (Rutherford, 1988). As well as being unstable, women's bodies have been seen as a source of temptation which has threatened to corrupt the rationality of white men's existence. However, white women did at least have a rightful place in reproducing a healthy race fit for domestic and colonial rule (Searle, 1971). In contrast, black peoples represented 'dangerous others' and were viewed as uncivilized, uncontrollable sexual and physical beings who constituted a threat to the moral order of Western civilization (Mercer and Race, 1988). This was supposedly clear to see as a result of the sexual appetites of black men and the size of the African penis (Walvin, 1982). During the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, European notions about the possibility of an evolutionary relationship between the African and the ape

reinforced this view. James Walvin (1982) describes how it was widely believed at the time that sexual relations took place between Africans and apes.

Explanations of why black peoples were defined through their bodies in this way usually go back to the social relations existing under colonization and slavery. However, there is evidence to suggest that in certain countries, such as England, strong notions of 'black' and 'white' existed long before there was any contact with Africans. As Jordan (1982: 44) notes, 'White and black connoted purity and filthiness, virginity and sin, virtue and baseness, beauty and ugliness, beneficence and evil, God and the devil'. Instead of being formulated as a way of legitimizing already existing white domination, these images may have been used as a way of bringing a stock of ready 'knowledge' to bear on early meetings with Africans.

It is undoubtedly the case, though, that where such images existed they were massively reinforced and supplemented by the establishment of colonization and slavery. As Frantz Fanon (1984 [1952]) argues, myths about animalistic black sexuality were self-consciously fabricated by white slave owners as a way of reducing their fears and providing an ideological justification for the brutal practices which supported colonization. These myths were incorporated into a literature which portrayed the atrocities of slavery as beneficial to its victims. For example, the beginnings of the European slave trade in Africa in the 1560s, which continued in British territories up to abolition in 1833, produced a literature which illustrated African men and women as savages who were ugly, violent and lascivious. Ethnology further justified slavery by referring to the innate capacity of blacks for knee bending, and even talked of the inherited disease of drapetomania (the tendency to run away) (Rose, 1976).

As slavery came under increased attack in the eighteenth century, the descriptions of Africans by slave traders grew increasingly derogatory. Africans were defined purely in terms of their differences from British culture. Whereas Britain was civilized and rational, Africa represented a 'pre-social' order governed by the unrestrained biological drives of primitive peoples.

Images of the dangers and mysteries of Africa lived on, and in the late Victorian period, it was common for English upper and middle class men to undertake travels in Africa in order to prove their 'manhood' (Segal, 1990). Social Darwinism was also employed to justify the establishment and maintenance of English colonies. As Steven Rose (1976) notes, as the English were the fittest, their civilizing mission abroad was supported by a biological imperative. Other 'scientific evidence' was also marshalled to prove the 'otherness' and inferiority of black peoples. For example, Paul Broca, a leading exponent of craniometry, argued that:

A prognathous [forward-jutting] face, more or less black color of the skin, woolly hair and intellectual and social inferiority are often associated, while more or less white skin, straight hair and an orthognathous [straight] face are the ordinary equipment of the highest groups in the human series. . . . A

group with black skin . . . has never been able to raise itself spontaneously to civilization. (Quoted in Gould, 1981: 834)

In America, defining the worth of black people through their bodies was also used to justify the treatment of blacks as commodities (more than one million blacks were sold from 1820 to 1860), and the use of black women for slave breeding (Marable, 1983). Fear of black sexuality also permeated the punishments inflicted on black people. For example, in the lynching of blacks between 1885 and 1900, the accusation of rape was made only in a third of all cases. However, the *justification* given for these lynchings always referred to the protection of white women from the bestial black man (Carby, 1987). This fear of black sexuality was also reflected in the final act of many lynchings, which involved the castration of victims, and lives on in contemporary American society. For example, with a few exceptions that are the responsibility of black film makers such as Spike Lee, Hollywood's portrayal of black sexuality has been confined to images of rape or as 'mere animal capacity incapable of producing civilization' (Dyer, 1986: 139; Lyman, 1990). Alternatively, a safer approach has been simply to deny black actors a strong sexual identity and confine them to roles updating the theme of the 'loyal black servant' (Lyman, 1990).

In artistic forms which have traditionally allowed for a greater range of expression than the cinema, the black body tends to be constructed as an object of dread and fascination by white men. For example, in the photography of Robert Maplethorpe, black men are both allowed and *reduced* to their sexuality. Gay pornography also tends to have a limited range of representations for black men who tend to appear either as sexual studs or as 'exotic orientals' (Mercer and Race, 1988).

The oppression of black men and women in contemporary America continues to be reinforced through social practices which appear to reflect a deep dread of the black body. In the legal system, for example, although 50 per cent of men convicted of murder involving rape in the Southern states are white, over 90 per cent of men executed for this offence are black. Most of these are accused of raping white women while, according to Staples (1982), by the beginning of the 1980s no white man had ever been executed for raping a black woman.¹

It is important to stress that the images of black people that have justified slavery, colonization and other forms of oppression were not uniform, but varied widely in their typifications and possessed their own specific trajectories. However, they have tended to focus on the body. An interesting example is provided by Mrinalini Sinha's (1987) research into the British ideology of moral imperialism in late nineteenth-century Bengal. Britain justified its rule in Bengal through a Victorian gender ideology which framed the stereotype of 'effeminate' Bengali men, and identified defects in Indian society which made it unfit for self-rule. Bengali men were not fit to share political and administrative power because of their questionable masculinity. Victorian ideology held that early sexual experience

was meant to corrupt the moral fibre of men, and Bengali men were suspect because of their inability to exercise sexual restraint. This was exhibited through the practice of child marriage. The Bengali male's physique was also constructed as 'puny' and 'diminutive' by the colonial authorities who used these images as sources of mirth and derision (Sinha, 1987: 218, 227). Bengali bodies were still viewed as 'other' in comparison with those of their white British rulers, but their detailed construction varied widely when compared to images of the African body.

Historically, the negative construction of black bodies has made them targets for a variety of moral panics surrounding health and disease. Under slavery, black Africans were seen as diseased and dirty. Fears of unclean 'foreign bodies' were later transported into immigration law. For example, restrictive health criteria were first introduced into British immigration law in 1905 in the context of a major panic about the 'degeneration' of the British race. In the 1960s, a minor outbreak of smallpox among Pakistanis in Bradford caused a moral panic on the part of the British Medical Association who demanded the medical surveillance of black immigrants. This was subsequently put into practice in the 1970s through the 'virginity testing' of Asian women (Jones, 1977; Mercer and Race, 1988). The latest and most widespread association of black bodies with disease has come as a result of AIDS, which has scapegoated black Africans as being both the possible cause and carriers of this syndrome (Alcorn, 1988). As well as being known as the 'gay plague', AIDS has been reported as the 'African plague', and has led to suggestions in Britain that even greater immigration and travel controls were needed over black Africans (Frankenberg, 1990; Watney, 1988).

Racism has been characterized by repeated attempts to impute negative characteristics to the bodies and general corporeal existence of various peoples. Indeed, the very construction of 'race' (a social category with no scientific basis in nature) has been dependent on the efforts of dominant nations and peoples classifying humans on the basis of corporeal characteristics such as skin colour. As Philip Cohen (1988) makes clear, there is nothing natural about categorizing people on the basis of particular bodily characteristics (such as colour) rather than others (height, for example). Social factors enter into the construction of certain peoples as 'visible', and the characteristics which define visibility can change over time. For example, in Britain in the 1850s Irish immigrants were singled out as 'dangerous' whereas in the 1950s their arrival was officially hardly noticed, despite the fact that they outnumbered immigrants from the New Commonwealth (Cohen, 1988).

In the 1870s and 1880s Jewish refugees were portrayed as 'less-civilized', 'unclean' and 'immoral', while in the 1950s the corporeal lives of other groups were stigmatized. West Indians, arriving as 'cheap casual labour', were viewed as carefree, low-living, immoral, disorderly colonial subjects. Sikhs, Moslems and Hindus on the other hand, seem to have been characterized as poor yet ambitious populations, set apart from their neighbours

not only by language but by alien religions and customs and a tendency toward insularity (Jones, 1977). In the 1970s, black youth were further criminalized in Britain through the social construction of mugging; a process which involved a prolonged and intense campaign on the part of the British media (Hall et al., 1978).

Sociologically, naturalistic views of the body are important because of the repeated attempts that have been made by the dominant in society to justify their position with reference to the supposedly inferior biological make-up of the dominated. The precise content of these views has varied historically, but they continue to play an influential role in contemporary society. Defining people's worth exclusively through their fleshy bodies is still common, even though the mind has come to constitute a more central part in these definitions of superiority and inferiority (Birke, 1986; Gould, 1981; Lewontin et al., 1984; Rose, 1984). However, while naturalistic views have most frequently been employed by the dominant sections of society, it is also important to examine some of the attempts that have been made to invert the arguments of these groups.

The privileged body

Historically, the practice of equating an individual's worth with their body has favoured dominant groups in society. Locating the causes of social inequalities in the unchanging, natural, biological body serves to make protests against the status quo appear both futile and misguided. However, it has not always been the dominant who have sought to equate individual identity with the biological body. The black power movement of the 1960s and 1970s sought to invert racist forms of the naturalistic body by celebrating black corporeality as privileged (Segal, 1990). Feminists have also appropriated a naturalistic approach to the body by drawing on an epistemology grounded in biological essentialism: 'a feminist version of the eternal female' (Barrett, 1987; Eisenstein, 1984: 106).

Shulamith Firestone formulated an early feminist version of the naturalistic approach, but her analysis retained many similarities to previous writings which portrayed women's bodies as inherently limiting. Firestone's argument (1971) is based on the premiss that the sexual division of labour has a biological basis. Human reproductive biology is seen as the fundamental basis for the universality of 'the biological family'; a unit characterized by children's dependence on a mother who is, in turn, dependent on a man. Although Firestone recognizes the importance of social institutions in maintaining male dominance, these have their ultimate foundations in human reproductive biology which makes women weaker than men and dependent on them. Consequently, women can break out of their subordination only by conquering the 'tyranny of their reproductive biology' through reliable contraceptive technology and methods of childbirth which minimize the use of the female body.

Alison Jaggar (1984) has pointed out that while Firestone's analysis was not widely adopted by the feminist movement, this did not prevent other feminists from constructing alternative accounts of patriarchy which continued to view the unchanging, pre-social biological body as the base on which self-identity and society is constructed. These accounts differed from Firestone's in seeing the female body in a far more positive light. As Jaggar (1984) notes, contemporary radical feminist writings abound with references to 'the power inherent in female biology', 'the creative power that is associated with female biology', and the 'native talent and superiority of women'. In these accounts, there is the repeated suggestion that women's special powers lie in their closeness to nature, which exists by virtue of their power to give birth. For example, Susan Griffin suggests that women and non-human nature are inseparable from each other (Griffin, 1978; Jaggar, 1984).

This feminist version of the naturalistic body involves celebrating the 'virtues' given to women by nature. Kaplan and Rogers (1990) have provided a useful summary of the social policy implications of such an approach. Feminists in the late 1970s argued that biologically innate 'talents', such as the ability to give birth and rear children, needed to be fully recognized and rewarded in order for women to reach a position of social equality. Here, social equality refers to women's *different role* being of *equal worth* to men's work. As Kaplan and Adams (1989) point out, this argument is not new and Fascist ideologies contained similar principles of equality in the 1920s even before Hitler came to power. As they say, 'Feminine virtues have been celebrated by men for thousands of years - without much evidence of gaining women any more rights or freedoms' (Kaplan and Rogers, 1990: 209).

Mary O'Brien's work (1979, 1981, 1989) constitutes what is probably the most sophisticated contemporary feminist version of a naturalistic approach to the body. Central to her analysis is the notion that reproduction is a material and historical process which has given rise to a reproductive consciousness that is 'genderically differentiated in significant and identifiable ways which stand in opposition to each other' (O'Brien, 1979: 235). Childbirth, and its associated 'moments', give women a connection to and knowledge of the world through experience which is fundamentally different from that to which men have access. These differences are represented by the examples of maternity and paternity.

For women, giving birth is a unity of knowing and doing, of consciousness and creative activity, of temporality and continuity. Paternity is a quite different phenomenon. The essential moment of paternity . . . is abstract and involuntary, it must be given meaning by abstract knowledge rather than by experience. (O'Brien, 1989: 14)

To simplify, the gendered character of reproductive consciousness develops from the fact that men's relationship to nature is characterized by alienation (of their seed in copulation), whereas women's relation to nature is

marked by continuity. Jeff Hearn (1987: 79) summarizes O'Brien's argument by noting that, 'Whereas maternity and maternal reproductive consciousness involve a unity of consciousness and involuntary reproductive labour, paternity and paternal reproductive consciousness are a process in which ideas (principles) dominate materiality' (for example, the *idea* of being a father prior to the birth of a child). In order to overcome this alienation, men seek to appropriate the child through fatherhood in marriage. Furthermore, fatherhood and marriage are merely the social beginning of the 'development of human institutions' and 'ideologies of male supremacy' which find their culmination in the separation of the public and private realms over which men exert control (O'Brien, 1981: 49).

In short, patriarchy has given primacy to men's definition of life and value which is grounded in their existential separation from species continuity. This has taken place as a result of men asserting control over the product of women's labour, children, and in their 'endless preoccupation' with 'death and destruction' (O'Brien, 1989: 15-16).

O'Brien's analysis traces the existence and development of patriarchy to the attempts by men to reintegrate what she terms the 'abstracted father' into the process of childbirth. Despite her critical analysis of male domination, though, this argument shares certain features with naturalistic views of the body which have historically served to oppress women. Through the biological process of birth, women are meant to have a different relation to knowledge from men. However, their world view is unable to inform the structure of society. This is because patriarchy - itself based on the *biological* separation of men from processes of birth - appropriates and devalues this experience. O'Brien's analysis implies that the forms of knowledge possessed by men and women which lead to patriarchy are both *natural* and *inevitable* as they are located in biology and nature.

As Michele Barrett (1987) argues, the danger with such analysis is that it comes close to abandoning the project of transforming the world into a place less dominated by traditional 'masculine' values. Furthermore, arguments based on the view that experience provides a privileged view of knowledge can lead to a situation in which simply to 'name yourself as part of a given group is to *claim* a moral backing for your words and actions' (Ardill and O'Sullivan, 1986: 33). As Barrett (1987) argues, the values attached to specific experiences become taken for granted in this moralistic political discourse, and the identities that people construct from their experiences are seen as unproblematic.

O'Brien's analysis also tends to presuppose a humanistic model of the subject which has complete control over access to knowledge of experience. Given the extent to which men and male-controlled technological equipment have informed the definition and experience of childbirth, though, this would seem an overly optimistic view of the knowledge which stems from such experience. A further problem with O'Brien's analysis is that it marginalizes women who are unable or unwilling to have children. Such women are still subject to a range of corporeal oppressions in

contemporary society such as rape or the threat of rape, but these cannot be accounted for by an analysis of the body which concentrates exclusively on the experience of childbirth.

These criticisms are not meant to dispute the very real advances that O'Brien's analysis makes in relating bodily experience to knowledge. Sociological accounts of knowledge and consciousness have all too often neglected the relationship between the mind and the body, yet this is a theme which lies at the very centre of O'Brien's work and needs to be taken very seriously in any adequate sociological account of the body. The problems with her analysis do not stem from its recognition of this important link, but from the overriding importance given to one set of bodily experiences attached to reproduction, and the relative neglect of other ways in which corporeal existence affects consciousness. For example, as Hearn (1987: 83) points out, sexuality affects male consciousness not just in terms of genetic discontinuity, but in relation to bodily contact, pleasure and pain *in their own right*.

The distorted body

An alternative feminist development of the naturalistic view focuses on how women's experiences of their bodies are distorted by dominant social forces. This is slightly different from the previous views of the body we have examined in this chapter, and it can be seen as an improvement upon them. Although the body provides a basis for the construction of patriarchal social relations, these relations are *themselves seen as shaping the bodies of women*. Naturalistic views tend only to see the body as a pre-social unchanging phenomenon, whereas this analysis of the distorted body allows for the body to be affected by social relations.

Susie Orbach (1988) and Kim Chernin (1983) provide good analyses of the 'distorted body', and represent an approach which has become increasingly popular in feminist literature concerned with eating disorders (e.g. Lawrence, 1987). It has also been popularized, and a growing number of magazines and newspapers now carry regular features which are concerned with women's relations with their bodies. Both Orbach and Chernin argue that women's bodies have *natural* sizes and shapes which are disrupted by patriarchal forces.

Orbach (1988) focuses on 'compulsive eating', a self-perpetuating cycle of overeating and starvation. Women engage in compulsive eating because natural hunger mechanisms are distorted, and because women's conscious desires to be 'thin' are undermined by an unconscious desire to be fat. Compulsive eating occurs as a result of women's social oppression. The pressures placed on women by the media and diet industries, and the restricted roles available to women at work and home are the two major sets of forces which distort their bodily development.

First, in order to become a wife and mother, a woman has to have a man; a goal represented to teenagers as essential yet almost unattainable. To get a man, a woman has to regard herself as a commodity whose value is based on her appearance and presentation (1988: 29-30). The stress placed on appearance means that women become vulnerable to the huge fashion and diet industries that put forward strong and limited images of what women should look like. The one constant in these images is that women should be thin, or at least totally free of excess fat. For Orbach, many women become seduced by these images and trapped in a circle of destructive and unhealthy diets. However, women do not always accept these pressures but, instead, often react against them. Indeed, for many women becoming fat has served as a way to avoid being marketed or seen as the ideal woman (1988: 31). As Orbach argues, these women tend to become *unnaturally* fat as this 'serves the symbolic function of rejecting the way . . . society distorts [them] and their relationships with others' (1988: 44).

The second stage to Orbach's analysis of how women's development becomes distorted involves the processes by which women treat food as a solution to other problems. For example, Orbach argues that over a period of years mothers come to subjugate and misrecognize their own needs as a result of putting first the needs of their children and husband. In these cases, eating often serves as a convenient substitute for their real emotional and intellectual needs (see also James, 1990). In the case of women who work outside the home, many remain fat as a way of neutralizing their sexual identity in the eyes of others who are important to them. As Orbach (1988: 35) argues, in this way women 'can hope to be taken seriously in their working lives outside the home' and not be treated 'frivolously' as sex objects by their male colleagues. Here again, the real needs of these women for respect are met indirectly, and inadequately, through food.

It should be clear by now that Orbach treats compulsive eating as an expression of other needs and frustrations. The relationship between unmet needs and food has its original base in the fraught mother-daughter relationship. This is distorted as a result of the patriarchal context which denies mothers status and equal opportunities to men outside the home, and becomes exacerbated when food becomes the object of struggle and conflict between mothers and daughters (1988: 36-45). *Natural* hunger mechanisms become submerged and eating becomes a response not to *biological need* but to social pressures.

For Orbach (1988: 118) compulsive eating means 'eating without regard to the physiological cues which signal hunger. . . . For the compulsive eater, food has taken on such additional significance that it has long since lost its obvious biological connection'. Orbach's work is not simply an analysis of why women eat compulsively and get fat, though, it is also a 'self-help guide' for losing *unnatural* weight. The key to weight loss is in uncoupling acts of compulsive eating from the feelings, and conflicts they express. Expressing these emotions in more productive ways and learning to listen

to natural hunger mechanisms is the way to return to a *natural* and balanced size.

Kim Chernin (1983) also analyses compulsive eating and asks why women in the West are faced with a 'tyranny of slenderness' which restricts their social and physical growth and expression. In contrast to men, who are brought up to take pride in their bodies, women are socialized to dislike theirs and frequently become obsessed in the quest for reduction (Bovey, 1989: 48, 229; Chernin, 1983: 62, 92). The damaging results of this quest have become increasingly public and range from the increased use of cosmetic surgery and liposuction, to an increase in anorexia nervosa. The growing number of fatalities which stem from the pressure women face to lose weight illustrates the point that 'women suffer more from living in the body than do men' (Chernin, 1983: 62; see also Bovey, 1989: 48, 224-9).

In explaining women's bodily oppression, Chernin draws on sociology, psychology and history. First, women are seen as too powerful for the male-dominated spheres of culture, politics and finance (1983: 96, 129). To maintain their power, men make women feel inadequate; feelings which are *turned against the body* (1983: 87, 190). Second, women are *initially* viewed as dangerous by men as a result of their experience of their mother's bodies as children. From their subsequent position of social power, men convert their fear and mistrust of the female body into attempts to control and reduce the physical space women occupy in society. Third, these pressures have increased in recent years, especially since the women's movement has threatened men's dominance. As Chernin argues:

The requirement that women remain arrested in development becomes more visible and more severe. From Mae West to Marilyn [Monroe] to Twiggy to Christine Olman there is a definite progression. . . . In this age of feminist assertion men are drawn to women of childish body and mind because there is something less disturbing about the vulnerability and helplessness of a small child - and something truly disturbing about the body and mind of a mature woman. (1983: 95, 110)

Orbach and Chernin's analyses have much to say at a substantive level about how women's bodies become damaged in patriarchal society. They reveal how social pressures can be internalized, find expression in eating and distort women's bodies. Cross-class, gender-specific processes are important to both explanations. First, Orbach and Chernin's work suggests that girls are subject to a socialization process geared to achieving success in marriage markets. Similarly, this tends to generate lifestyles which serve to set women apart from men. This involves the denial of bodily and other needs in order to serve others (Charles and Kerr, 1988; Murcott, 1983), and does not help girls appropriate leisure choices as their *own* (Griffin et al., 1982: 93).

Second, the importance of the shape of girls' bodies in society can influence attitudes to physical activity. Despite the rise of the athletic body in consumer culture (Featherstone, 1982), a clear division remains between acceptable and unacceptable forms of the female body. Large muscles

remain unacceptable and the fear of developing them puts many girls off PE (Bryson, 1987; Willis, 1974, 1985). Further, PE dress is often seen by girls as an unacceptable way of displaying their bodies at school as it is opposed to their sense of self-identity as adult women (Griffin et al., 1982). Now, Orbach and Chernin make clear that not all girls follow the path of seeking to develop their bodies in line with male ideals. However, this rejection also alienates women from their bodies (for example, through compulsive eating). So, women tend either to conform to traditional socialization and seek to develop the ideal body, or, in rejecting these processes, risk damaging their bodies through eating disorders.

Third, most sporting activities occur in the public sphere of life. However, women face pressures to construct their main role in the *private* sphere of the household. For example, Griffin's findings (1985) of how girls drop their girlfriends in favour of spending evenings in with boyfriends as a way of saving money for their future is hardly compatible with them developing independent sporting interests which they may carry on in married life.

Fourth, Orbach and Chernin highlight the role of male-dominated institutions in restricting bodily development. For example, sport for boys has historically been organized to reflect the development of muscular versions of masculinity (Graydon, 1983; Simon and Bradley, 1975). PE is still the most segregated subject in schools and its organization remains embedded within gender ideologies of (male) bodily expansion and (female) bodily restriction.

In summary, this feminist development of the naturalistic approach highlights how women can become alienated from their physicality. In contrast to men, women tend to be restricted from embodying power in their physical selves (Gilroy, 1989). This view of the distorted body also represents a considerable advance in certain respects over other naturalistic views of the body in that it recognizes that women's bodies are actually *affected by* social relations and institutions. Naturalistic views tend to be too busy stressing the ways in which the body gives rise to particular patterns of social relations to recognize how these relations themselves impinge upon the shape and development of bodies. The body is not simply a basis on which society arises, *but is itself affected by society*.

However, despite the contributions made by this analysis of the 'distorted body', it is problematic methodologically. For Orbach, *thin* is natural while *fat* is distortion. These bodily states encompass inherent attributes. As Nicky Diamond (1985: 54) argues, "'fat, thin" appear as pre-given oppositions in nature, "thin" as a natural state and goal, "fat" as pathological and a problem'. Seeing fat as the problem 'reproduces those cultural ideals of femininity which define "thin" as the ideal' (1985: 47). Despite encouraging women to 'accept themselves', Orbach argues that 'every woman [really] wants to be thin' (Bovey, 1989).

In contrast to Orbach, Chernin sees *fat* women's bodies as positive and natural. Women who slim are caught up in a struggle against what is *natural*

(1983: 9), and the reason the vast majority put back on the weight they lose is because weight belongs to them 'by nature' (1983: 30, 54). While this analysis disputes the prevalent stereotypes of women's bodies, it suffers, along with Orbach, from essentialism. Both Orbach and Chernin have made improvements to existing naturalistic views of the body. However, neither of their writings manage to escape completely from the basic assumptions of the naturalistic approach.

Orbach and Chernin are not the only writers to view women's bodies as having natural shapes and sizes which are distorted by society. For example, Epstein (1987) and Dana (1987) both see women as naturally thin and view excess eating as a substitute for other needs and activities, while Mitchell (1987) argues that women's bodies can be distorted by vigorous exercise. However, all these writers posit the existence of an unchanging natural body, an ontological stance which has affinities with sexist views of women's bodies as inferior to men's because of their 'natural' functions (Connell, 1987), and racist views of Afro-Caribbean bodies as naturally more powerful and sexual than white bodies.

The overburdened body

In this chapter I have sought to provide a brief description of the emergence of naturalistic views of the body during the eighteenth century, and critically examine several naturalistic views which have been influential since that time.

One of the remarkable features of naturalistic views is that, with the exception of Chernin's and Orbach's analyses of the distorted body, the basic principles underlying them have remained unchanged. First, they are *reductionist*. The structure of society is explained not only on the basis of the individuals within it, but the intentions, actions and potential of individuals are explained as a result of some aspect of their physical or genetic constitution. For example, in the case of sociobiology 'a causal chain is said to begin at the level of the genetic units and run through the society as a whole' (Rose, 1984: 44). Second, having established the essential features of people's corporeality, these are then classified into simplistic *social* categories (for example, male/female, black/white, upper/middle/working class) which ignore overlaps in, and stress the differences between, human bodies (Birke, 1986, 1992). These social categories are then reified as natural phenomena.

One way to illustrate further the inadequacies of these basic principles is to describe one of the early antecedents of the naturalistic view of the body. In Plato's tale, the division of Citizens of The Republic into three classes was justified on the basis of the different metals from which God had crafted them. Those made of silver were destined to be auxiliaries, and those of brass and iron to be husbandmen and craftsmen. Furthermore, if people sought to rise above their pre-destined station in life, the State stood

to be destroyed. Centuries later, sociobiologists reproduced the logic, if not the content, of this argument by justifying the status quo on the basis of its genetic foundations. Genes determine individual features and social structures which are best suited for survival. Attempts to alter social structures are ill-fated and could destroy society. In both cases, a highly limited and inaccurate definition of the significance of people's bodies is taken as definitive of their self-identity and constitutive of society. They are equally narrow and unconvincing accounts of the social importance of the human body.

The naturalistic focus on the body has proved unsatisfactory for most sociologists. In this respect, historians of the body have provided an important service by identifying a period prior to the eighteenth century when the body was seen as a receptor, rather than a generator, of social meanings and relationships. Indeed, the view of the body as open to seemingly constant reinterpretation appeared to provide a much more plausible starting point for sociologists interested in the body than did the naturalistic approach. For sociologists, naturalistic views of the bodies of women and black peoples tended to say much less about what might be termed 'corporeal reality', than about the enormous utility of the body as a highly malleable ideological resource. In rejecting the negative aspects of naturalistic views, however, sociologists have tended to neglect how the body forms a basis for, and contributes towards, social life. It is this aspect of the naturalistic view which I feel is worth developing, and which tends to get lost in social constructionist accounts of the body.

Note

1. In relation to the death penalty, it is worth noting that David Gaskins, who was executed in South Carolina in 1991, was the first white man to be killed by the state for the murder of one black victim since 1944.