

Body Management and Gender Relations: Tools for Historical Research in Physical Education

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Gender is now widely recognized to be an important category of historical analysis. Like the categories of race and class which raise questions about the ways in which economic and sociopolitical conditions create a social context, gender also denotes cultural constructions, those which impose ideas about appropriate roles for, and relations between, women and men. According to Joan Scott (*Gender and the Politics of History*, 1988), gender is “a social category imposed upon a sexed body.” Gender is therefore an important and useful tool in histories of physical culture, health, athletics, and more broadly, attitudes towards the physical body. The body as a social object has become a popular and important topic of study in the social sciences. Michel Foucault describes a “political anatomy” (*Discipline and Punish*) wherein society defines and construes the meanings attached to the body. Susan Bordo further suggests that the preoccupation with “body management,” or the way that society determines how female and male bodies should be dressed, fed, exercised, and represented, reflects and reinforces the gender arrangement in society, the division between those who assert power and those who are subject to such definitions. By linking the notion of the body as a socially constructed entity with an exploration into the social organization of sexual difference, the body can be viewed as an expression of “cultural geography,” where the values and attitudes of the culture are imprinted on the physical body.

The last half of the 19th century provides fruitful examples for the application of these concepts. One example of middle-class preoccupation with “body management” is found in the increase in concerns about the ramifications of higher education for the healthy function of female reproductive physiology. A number of physicians began to assert that the energy required for intellectual work would cause permanent damage to the reproductive system, and recommended that women not undertake an education equal to that found in the men’s colleges. The administrators at many institutions which enrolled female students further sought to circumscribe the ways in which their charges studied, ate, rested, and exercised their bodies. The notion that the body is subject to the vagaries of cultural attitudes and gender relations demonstrates the usefulness of Foucault’s notion of “political anatomy.” This concept suggests that the meanings behind, for example, 19th century medical discourse, are an inextricable part of the broader culture and its system of power relations.