

Embodied Neoliberalism and the Mind as Tool to Manage the Body: A Descriptive Study Applied to Young Australian Amateur Athletes

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Abstract : Amid the rise of neoliberalism to the leading economic policy model in Western societies in the 1980s, people have started to internalise a neoliberal way of thinking, whereby the human body has become an entity that can and needs to be precisely managed through free yet rational decision-making processes. The neoliberal citizen has consequently become an entrepreneur of the self who is free, independent, rational, productive and responsible for themselves, their health and wellbeing as well as their appearance. The focus on individuals as entrepreneurs who manage their bodies through the rationally thinking mind has, however, become increasingly criticised for viewing the social actor as 'disembodied', as a detached, social actor whose powerful mind governs over the passive body. On the other hand, the discourse around embodiment seeks to connect rational decision-making processes to the dominant neoliberal discourse which creates an embodied understanding that the body, just as other areas of people's lives, can and should be shaped, monitored and managed through cognitive and rational thinking. This perspective offers an understanding of the body regarding its connections with the social environment that reaches beyond the debates around mind-body binary thinking. Hence, following this argument, body management should not be thought of as either solely guided by embodied discourses nor as merely falling into a mind-body dualism, but rather, simultaneously and inseparably as both at once. The descriptive, qualitative analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with young Australian amateur athletes between the age of 18 and 24 has shown that most participants are interested in measuring and managing their body to create self-knowledge and self-improvement. The participants thereby connected self-improvement to weight loss, muscle gain or simply staying fit and healthy. Self-knowledge refers to body measurements including weight, BMI or body fat percentage. Self-management and self-knowledge that are reliant on one another to take rational and well-thought-out decisions, are both characteristic values of the neoliberal doctrine. A neoliberal way of thinking and looking after the body has also by many been connected to rewarding themselves for their discipline, hard work or achievement of specific body management goals (e.g. eating chocolate for reaching the daily step count goal). A few participants, however, have shown resistance against these neoliberal values, and in particular, against the precise monitoring and management of the body with the help of self-tracking devices. Ultimately, however, it seems that most participants have internalised the dominant discourses around self-responsibility, and by association, a sense of duty to discipline their body in normative ways. Even those who have indicated their resistance against body work and body management practices that follow neoliberal thinking and measurement systems, are aware and have internalised the concept of the rational operating mind that needs or should decide how to look after the body in terms of health but also appearance ideals. The discussion around the collected data thereby shows that embodiment and the mind/body dualism constitute two connected, rather than two separate or opposing concepts.

Keywords : dualism, embodiment, mind, neoliberalism

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