

Gender, Agency, and Health: An Exploratory Study Using an Ethnographic Material for Illustrative Reasons

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Abstract : The aim of this paper is to explore the connection between gender, agency, and health on personal and social levels over time. The use of gender as an analytical tool for health research has been shown to be useful to explore thoughts and ideas that are taken for granted, which have relevance for health. The paper highlights the following three issues. There are multiple forms of femininity and masculinity. Agency and social structure are closely related and referred to in this paper as 'gender agency'. Gender is illuminated as a product of history but also treated as a social factor and a producer of history. As a prominent social factor in the process of shaping living conditions, gender is highlighted as being significant for understanding health. To make health explicit as a dynamic and complex concept and not merely the opposite of disease requires a broader alliance with feminist theory and a post-Bourdiesian framework. A personal story, included with other ethnographic material about women's networking in rural Sweden, is used as an empirical illustration. Ethnographic material was chosen for its ability to illustrate historical, local, and cultural ways of doing gendered and capitalized health. New concepts characterize ethnography, exemplified in this study by 'processes of transformation'. The semi-structured interviews followed an interview guide drafted with reference to the background theory of gender. The interviews lasted about an hour and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcribed interviews and the author's field notes formed the basis for the writing up of this paper. Initially, the participants' interests in weaving, sewing, and various handicrafts became obvious foci for networking activities and seemed at first to shape compliance with patriarchy, which generally does the opposite of promoting health. However, a significant event disrupted the stability of this phenomenon. What was permissible for the women began to crack and new spaces opened up. By exploiting these new spaces, the participants found opportunities to try out alternatives to emphasized femininity. Over time, they began combining feminized activities with degrees of masculinity, as leadership became part of the activities. In response to this, masculine enactment was gradually transformed and became increasingly gender neutral. As the tasks became more gender neutral the activities assumed a more formal character and the women stretched the limits of their capacity by enacting gender agency, a process the participants referred to as 'personal growth' and described as health promotion. What was described in terms of 'personal growth' can be interpreted as the effects of a raised status. Participation in women's networking strengthened the participants' structural position. More specifically, it was the gender-neutral position that was rewarded. To clarify the connection between gender, agency, and health on personal and social levels over time the concept processes of transformation is used. This concept is suggested as a dynamic equivalent to habitus. Health is thus seen as resulting from situational access to social recognition, prestige, capital assets and not least, meanings of gender.

Keywords : a cross-gender bodily hexis, gender agency, gender as analytical tool, processes of transformation

Conference Title : ICHMS 2021 : International Conference on Health and Medical Sociology

Conference Location : Sydney, Australia

Conference Dates : March 29-30, 2021