

Young Bodies in Shaping. A Sociological Interactionist Field Study of Children and Adolescents' Body Practices in School Peer Relations

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Abstract : Childhood and adolescence are periods characterized by significant bodily changes, particularly puberty's influence on body shape and appearance. Research has demonstrated that concerns related to body size and body images significantly influence the well-being of children and adolescents. Much of this research adopts an individualistic and/or psychological perspective. Less attention has been paid to relational aspects, particularly the ways in which children and adolescents as embodied, social agents, are actively engaged in relationally shaping and doing body-related practices in various social contexts. This study aims to address this gap by employing a microsociological interactionist approach to explore the social dynamics surrounding children and adolescent's embodiment, seeking to answer the following question: How do children and adolescents shape and practice their different bodies in peer relations? Methodologically, this research is based on a sociological field study, immersed in the everyday lives of children and adolescents as they unfold in school. Drawing on body sociology, the study observes their embodied practices in social interactions, over a six-month period (Winter/Spring 2025). The research follows three classes from the 1st, 4th, and 7th grades (age range 6-14), respectively, in a public school in Northern Denmark, supplemented by focus group interviews with the children and adolescents, as well as with affiliated teachers and pedagogues. The field study, as an embodied activity, and the physicality of the methodology, provide valuable insights into how children and adolescents practice and make sense of their different bodies. This type of field study also aligns with the interactionist focus on social reality as it unfolds in situ. Within this interactionist inspired framework, social interactions are considered the fundamental unit through which meaning-making and social relations are co-created among social actors. From this perspective, everyday life serves as a central social context, and being embedded in the children and adolescents' daily school life allows for an in-depth exploration of their often mundane and taken-for-granted practices in peer relations - in other words, the social knowledge that constitutes everyday life. Utilizing sensitizing concepts such as Julia Coffey's framework on 'Everyday Embodiment,' this research describes the diverse ways in which children and adolescents practice and shape their different bodies in everyday social interactions, conceptualising the body as processual and social instead of static. This study's unique contribution lies in its explorative nature and in foregrounding the relational shaping of children and adolescents' embodied practices and interactions. Providing insights into how children and adolescents practice their different bodies and interact with current body images, these findings can contribute to the development of future strategies and interventions aimed at enhancing the well-being of young people.

Keywords : adolescence, body image, body sociology, childhood, embodiment, everyday practices, field study, interactionism, peer relations, well-being

Conference Title : ICBSSR 2025 : International Conference on Body Sociology and Social Relationships

Conference Location : Oslo, Norway

Conference Dates : June 26-27, 2025