

Anthropology News



Gendering and the Scrutiny of Bodies

Let's Talk Gender

M. Gabriela Torres

We have normed the scrutiny of bodies. All too often we blame the media for teaching us how to judge our bodies through the constant circulation of unachievable physiques. Yet, learning to discipline our bodies into what they should be starts with the everyday. Take for instance, the practices of regular inspection and assessment that take place in our country's schools.

Young girls and boys are taught early on that what they wear will be inspected by school administrators, with girls' dress often deemed particularly "[distracting](#)." Spaghetti straps, tank tops, clothes that are "too loose" or "too tight" are targeted in school dress codes. Such dress codes are highly gendered forms of bodily scrutiny veiled behind purportedly commonsensical notions of decorum. In a particularly egregious recent dress code controversy in Mesa, Arizona, school posters read: "[So you come to school looking pretty cute but what the boys see is meat, and it's distracting.](#)"



Assessing the Body. Photo Courtesy M. Gabriela Torres

Children's bodies are scrutinized by schools beyond dress codes. The assessment of their body mass is regular practice in an effort to combat the health risks associated with our obesity epidemic. My own children have been weighed at school for years by state mandate which used to be accompanied by a now-defunct "[fat letter](#)." Across the U.S., children are routinely weighed with the understood expectation that their [BMIs should conform to standardized notions of the healthy](#).

The institutional evaluation of bodies has wide-ranging and often unacknowledged consequences, and it always exists within a broader context of gendered forms of discipline.

The detailed ethnographic work of anthropologists has shown that well-meaning efforts to collect public health data or induce social change through BMI monitoring actually pose particular risks to health and welfare of individuals and may carry a number of objectionable social consequences.

Susan Greenhalgh, for instance, has called attention to the unintended consequences of [BMI measurement, noting the rise of new types of disordered eating](#). Two recent volumes caution us on the social consequences of this type of bodily scrutiny. In [Reconstructing Obesity](#) and [Fat Talk Nation](#), medical anthropologists call attention to the ways that the moral arguments of [America's War on Fat](#) are couched as health-talk, but are ultimately used to define which bodies enjoy the full privileges of citizenship and which bodies endure the force of stigma.

The [scrutiny of bodies and behavior, even when it is designed within the context of medical care](#), has been shown to be particularly problematic because it enables forms of institutional violence that restrict women's agency and bodies. [Claire Wendland](#)'s work shows this by looking at how obstetric practices that purportedly seek improved health outcomes for women are organized around the erasure of the pregnant body from consideration.

Institutions are not alone in norming through scrutiny and its accompanying judgements. In practice, the scrutiny of bodies appears in tandem with common assessment and judgement mechanisms that are habitually employed for disciplining persons into gendered expectations.

The recent [#MORETHANMEAN](#) response to the twitter of [surveillance and scom of sports commentators in Chicago](#) is one example that highlights the nexus between surveillance and the discipline of norming gendered behavior. Political discourse is now, more than ever, replete with this form of gendered discipline – gaining widespread circulation in the [critiques leveled by Donald Trump of Megyn Kelly](#) in early 2016.

The political acumen of female politicians is well known to be routinely measured by [their performance of acceptable forms of femininity](#). [Diane Nelson](#), working on the reaction to Nobel Laureate Rigoberta Menchu's turn to political office in Guatemala, shows that the performance of femininity is one of the first ways that female political figures are evaluated in public discourse.

Our culture – and not just the media – routinely engages in the norming of women. All too often, this is done through the use of surveillance tactics that are problematically close to the ways we examine and judge our children's bodies. Just as in assessments of weight or dress, anthropologists show that morality

assessed by self-acclaimed authorities looms large in defining whose bodies are ultimately found to be healthy, socially acceptable, professional, and even presidential.

[M. Gabriela Torres](#) is an Associate Professor Anthropology at Wheaton College (MA). She is a Guatemalan-born anthropologist that specializes in the study of gender based violence and state formation. Her latest publication is a co-edited book (with Kersti Yllö) entitled "Marital Rape: Consent, Marriage and Social Change in Global Context" (Oxford U Press 2016).

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