

# Social Construction of the Cultural Identity of the Adolescent through Body Expression

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## Abstract

Our study is based on a qualitative approach in order to collect relevant data. We chose to proceed by means of a semi-directive interview with practitioners of body expression. As a part of an interview corpus, we tried to highlight the sociocultural factors coming to promote the progress of a cultural identity, both masculine and feminine among teenagers through body expression, which is socially apprehended as a feminine practice. The question of the body constitutes an essential meeting point between the adolescent problem and the practice of body expression. Culture and social connections interfere in the construction of identity. During adolescence, identity transforms within small groups such as family, friends and school.

## Keywords

Body, Body Sociology, Cultural Identity, Adolescent, Body Expression

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## 1. Introduction

The study of the body offers, under this measure, a privileged approach road for the “WHO” instances as much as those of “WHAT”, enhancing to question afresh the notion of identity, unavoidable but evaluated on the market of scientific concepts (Dubar, 2000; Brubaker, 2001). The latter equally suffers, indeed, from a police for which “the researcher (WHO) has nothing to say” often takes refuge (Chapoulie, 2002) than the subjectivist orientation which strikes its uses in the sociological field. Proponents of a brand identity give pride of place to the play of consciousness in the development of self-image to neo-behaviorists that are more indifferent to mechanisms that shake the different components of the self. The sociology of the individual only devotes a weak room for the works that are eager to examine the articulations of even the frequently set

dimensions.

Always and through all civilizations, the body fascinates in that it constitutes the physical surface which incarnates the human being, giving them a “material”, a carnal consistency. It is through our body we capture, feel and respond to stimuli of our environment. Our five senses, gestures, attitudes... are all elements that are part of our body expressions and our perception and those that revolve around us.

The human condition is bodily. As an identity content on the individual and collective level, the body is a space given to see and read for the appreciation of others. It is by our body that we are named, known, identified to a social belonging. The skin encloses the body and the ego boundaries. It establishes the border between the inside and the outside in a lively, porous manner as it is also open to the world, a vivid memory. It envelopes and incarnates the person by distinguishing them from others, or by connecting them, according to the signs used. The body is the identity origin of the person, the place and time where the world is flesh (Le Breton, 2005).

Generally, we note little work on masculine identity compared with much work on women. According to Elizabeth Badinter (1994) this situation is explained by the fact that we attribute a “universal” character to the man, rarely issued. However, Daniel Welzer-Lang (2000) opens new spaces to think and criticize the androcentrism by taking into account the works of masculine authors (Godelier, 1982) and the texts issued from feminist sociology.

Studying the access of men in the sporting or artistic fields so-called “feminine” seems, hence, particularly relevant to apprehend the complex dynamics of the diversity of the gender dispositions within societies. For Laberge (1994), the analysis of this complexity brings an important contribution in the understanding of the field of physical and sporting activities.

Moreover, the entry of men in the dance activity is partially explained by inconsistent socialisation modes, particularly regarding the construction of the sexuated identity, as shown by several authors in other activities (Mennesson, 2000; Davis, 1990).

To deal with the painful questions of the identity construction and the construction of the body image, what is happening to the adolescence as the body evolves abruptly? Or would the identity which the subject had as a child evolve?

How does the teenager build his/her own identity according to their culture and the social reports from the one hand, and how do society, culture that shape it and the social reports that characterize it influence the individual from the other hand?

## 2. Materials and Methods

In our societies, being a person with body expression (dance) raises numerous questions. Through our survey, we essentially have to understand the investment of men in the body expressions, artistic physical activity generally qualified of “feminine” by the “common sense”. During adolescence, the social construction of the cultural identity involves essentially as for the individual, the construction and the manifestation of their femininity or masculinity ensuring them a positive self-image in accordance with the ex-

pectations of the society.

- 1) The sociocultural factors came promote the development of a cultural identity both masculine and feminine among the adolescents through body expression.
- 2) Body expression is socially apprehended as a feminine practice.

## 2.1. Study Population

The approach adopted is qualitative in order to have access to relevant data. We chose to proceed by means of a semi-directive interview with 20 body expression practitioners in Gafsa (south Tunisia). Their age is between 16- and 18-year-old.

## 2.2. Investigative Tool

From an interview corpus with teenagers, we tried to highlight the factors that intervene in the social construction of the cultural identity of the adolescents (**Table 1**).

## 3. Discussion of Results

### 3.1. Process of Socialization

#### 3.1.1. Sports Socialization and Participation in the Group of Peers

For an important part of the population studied (5 female dancers and 7 male dancers), we find that they practiced another sport in the beginning. This is due to the choices required by the parents. Certain fathers transmit their sporting practice with impregnation by bringing their daughters or sons since their youngest age to the field to learn the technical characteristics of the activity. It is in this sense that (O-M) says that: "My father brings me everyday, for four years, to practice Karate, while I hate this sport. At the age of 7, I would flee the course of Karate to go watching dance. I was fascinated by music and the steps of dance". For three dancers, it is due to their innate brothers that

**Table 1.** Interview grid.

TOPICS	INDICATORS
1-General characteristics	Name-Age-Social origin-Family situation-Number of children-Siblings (number of sisters and brothers; rank in the sibship)-Living place-Religion and Religious practice-Academic trajectory-Professional status-Parents' occupation-Sport activities of the parents.
2-Course in body expression	Diplomas-Body expression trajectory-Choice of body expression. Body expression place-Status of the self-Attributed dancer-Definition of the style.
3-The factors of socialisation.	Characteristics of the family-Cultural origins-Type of the family socialization-Type of socialization of the group peers-Definition of the self.
4-Definition of the identity - identity for self - Identity for others	Representation of the roles men-women in the society and in body expression-Definition of the masculine-Definition of the feminine -Opinions on diverse topics. Position of the family-Position of peers-External looks.

they practice body expression since their young age. For the majority of the practitioners of body expression, it is due to media and internet they are oriented to body expression. A minority is influenced by the peer groups. With the same idea, (S-D) claims: “I spend hours and even a whole night carefully watching videos of bodily expression, I adore choreographies of everything that is contemporal. It is through Youtube videos I learned how to dance.”

Indeed, the socialization of the individual is carried- out throughout life although it is carried-out in a privileged way during childhood where personality is built, through the acquisition of essential roles, the understanding of collective rules and the construction of a proper identity (Mead, 1934). Multiple instances assume the function of socialization: family, school, media, peer groups...Individuals internalize values and assimilate the norms. P. Bourdieu uses the term habitus to design the way individuals internalize the given notions, adapt them and constitute the rules of conduct and judgment.

### 3.1.2. Particular Family Configurations

Certain parents (two female dancers out of ten) refuse to allow their daughters practice body expression. For them, body expression is a practice that clashes with the Islamic religion. The adolescent (H-G) suggests that their parents are opposed to their body expression practice. “My father considers that dance is a purely feminine practice and opposes with my religion. He insults me saying-do what men do and choose a sport that shows your virility.”

## 3.2. The Process of Acculturation of Adolescents

Most adolescents (eight dancers out of ten) who practice body expression are influenced by western music and even the way of dancing, clothing, and hair dressing. This is explained by the global assimilation of the values of the other, the adoption of their norms, in other words, the assimilation of the foreign culture.

Such adolescents (three girls out of ten) wear the “hijab” but they are as well influenced by music and the way of dancing. (F-O) says: “wearing the veil does not contradict with music and sport, It is true that I am a practitioner but this does not cause problems. Dancing does not mean non-respect, I dance and with my veil I oblige all people to respect me.”

## 3.3. Social Representation of Body Expression

### 3.3.1. The Notion of “Gendered Provisions”

In the region of Gafsa, the majority of the body expression practitioners choose a dancing style that shows potency, strength, overtaking, heterosexuality, and domination. (R-G) assures that: “I opt for the free-style to prove that dancing is not feminine. It is made for both men and women. Through my dancing steps I assume that I am a strong man, dynamic and lively. I use even boxing movements in my choreography.” The diverse meanings given to the notion of body expression revolve around the opposition between the body that is institutionalized, normalized or even repressed by the sociocultural norms and an expressive, spontaneous and original. It is the liberating

aspect that emerges from this type body compared to the former that the theorists consider as alienated by a social system rigid and conformist.

Femininity and masculinity, produced through corporeity, are expressed by specific bodily forms, postures and attitudes, style and gesture, as well as differentiated usages of the body. By integrating the self-body, its gender features, hence, enclose the individual and his bodily appearance in behavioural models and prototypes of stereotyped self-presentation according to group of gender of appearance. Thereby, femininity and masculinity are expressed by the distinguished criteria that found them and shape the outline of the models of both the feminine and masculine body. They are socially built and this construction “pushes us to believe in its necessity and naturality” (Butler, 2006: p. 264), but also in its unchangeable aspect of appearance.

### 3.3.2. Men in a Feminine Practice

Today, dance is socially apprehended as a feminine practice. This space is progressively diversified historically by feminizing, and today it constitutes, as other disciplines, a space for practice and contemporary styles that are more or less “naturalized” or anyway more or less differentiated.

The adolescent (A-B) says: “I do not dare to say to my friends and my parents that I practice body expression as they consider this practice feminine.” They believe that “I practice Kung-Fu. That is why I do not feel at ease but I am unable to say the truth.”

The works of Colette Guillaumin (1992) perfectly show the importance of the body and the processes of incorporation in the production and reproduction of the differences between genders. The central place of “Learning by the body” (Faure, 2000) in the construction of differences between sexes institutes the bodily practices (sporting or artistic) in privileged analyser of this process. In that sense, the sporting practices, the best place of naturalisation of gendered differences and reproduction of the masculine domination (Bourdieu, 1998) offer an investigating field particularly interesting to apprehend the modalities of constitution (and modification) of gendered dispositions of actors.

### 3.4. Provisions and Identity

The sociology of the social reports of gender uses mainly the notion of gendered identity. The gendered identity is defined as the result of social construction of the system of values and behaviors of both men and women.

In our research, the choice of body expression by men falls within a certain living style. In order to understand the meaning of this practice investment, the identification of the social conditions in which the habitus is constituted, and the social conditions, in which it is implemented, is essential (Bourdieu, 1980).

The works of Claude Dubar illustrates that the identity is apprehended as the result of double transaction, building “an identity for self” and an “identity for the other”. “The identity for the self is the manner in which the individuals are defined and re-counted.” The identity for the other “is elaborated by the link established between the

individual and the institutions”. It represents the way we think to be defined by others. The identity is, hence, considered as a dynamic form. For Dubar, actors try to adjust these two types of identity by elaborating the strategies of identity (Dubar, 1992).

The social reality is built through the number and importance of places of socialisation. In that sense, the world of bodily expression could be qualified in the place of secondary socialisation. The context of socialisation “bodily” strongly influences the process of the construction of gendered identities of actors (Mennesson, 2002).

#### 4. Conclusion

The majority of adolescents are oriented towards body expression due to media and internet. A minority, however, is influenced by their peer groups and brothers. In the region of Gafsa, certain parents consider that the practice of body expression is opposed to the religion of Islam. Concerning the process of acculturation, most of adolescents choose and assimilate the foreign culture through dancing styles, the way of clothing, and hair-dressing. Adolescents choose a dance style which makes proof of masculinity although body expression is a feminine practice.

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