



Activity 1: Historicizing the Body

Many people assume that the human body today is essentially the same as it was in the past. Is this true, though? In this activity we will look at what factors can influence the way we use our bodies and try to think about how our ideas about the body have changed over time.

Cultural Bodies

Our bodies are constantly being shaped by the things we do with them. As we all know, diet and exercise habits have huge impacts on our bodies over time. We don't need to stop there, though. Washing, hair dye and cosmetics, drugs, clothes, and exposure to the sun and cold all affect the way our bodies look, function, and feel.

Although we make personal choices about these matters, our choices are made within specific cultural and historical contexts. For example, you might want to get a tattoo, but this will only be possible if certain cultural, economic, and technological preconditions allow you to do so. What if your culture strongly disapproves of tattoos? Or if you don't have the money to pay for it? Or you can't access the tools and expertise that tattooing requires?

We can see that many of the things that we do with our bodies are determined by our particular cultural circumstances. Food is a good example of this – people in different countries typically have very different diets. The same principle can be applied to different historical periods. People in the past ate differently, exercised differently, and experienced their bodies differently in manifold other ways. For that reason, **we can think of the body as a cultural and historical phenomenon, as well as a biological one.**

When we talk about *historicizing* something, we mean that we are treating it as an object of historical enquiry. For example, we historicize the body when we study the way it has changed

Task

1. What kinds of cultural practices have an impact on *your* body?
2. How do you think your body would be different if you were born into a different culture?

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Understanding the body across time and place

There are many different ways of understanding the body. Some people believe that the body is similar to a machine, with each component performing its specific physiological function. Others believe that the body is animated by an invisible life-force, such as the soul. These different theories are the result of very different histories of thinking about the body.

In the early modern period, different theories of the body coexisted in European culture. A **humoral** theory of the body, originating with the classical writer **Galen**, continued to be widely accepted. According to this theory, the body contains four types of liquid, or *humours*: blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm. Health is equated with a balance between these. However, new theories of the body were also emerging in this period. Increasingly, people saw the body as a self-enclosed machine. The discovery that the blood circulated around the body, and that the heart functioned as a pump, strengthened this view.

Task

1. Try watching these two videos, each of which explains the nature of bodily energy. Consider the different assumptions that they contain:

[Prana](#)

[Metabolism](#)

2. Why do you think they're so different?
3. Have you ever experienced your body differently after learning something new about it?
4. Did your own body feel different while you were listening to explanations of prana and the metabolism?
5. Do you think it's possible to separate your bodily experiences from the workings of your mind?

Explore More...

You could watch an online documentary about the history of anatomy here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjZR1IF9JdM>