

The Life Course and Socially Constructed Bodies: Understanding Health Inequalities Through Intersectionality and Embodiment

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Embodiment is one of the most fundamental processes that underlies the production of health inequalities over the life course, yet tends to be overlooked, or misunderstood by scientists and health professionals. Understanding how our social world is embodied from early life onwards provides insights into the persistent nature of systemic health inequities, and how to reduce them. This presentation will address two important facets relating to research on health inequalities. First, the relevance of an intersectional framework of analysis to considering the co-constructed nature of social positions, formed at the crossroads of structural systems such as gender, social class and race/ethnicity (etc), and affecting embodied experiences at each stage of life. Second, while our understanding of physiological responses to the socially structured external environment has been aided by the increasing availability of biological data at deeper layers, we also need to examine the social differences in the lived-experience of these internalised responses. Evidence across disciplines suggests that bodily sensations are felt, interpreted, acted upon (or not), and outwardly expressed differently across social groups. This relation to the body is formed through socially situated life course processes. Placing an intersectional lens on our examination of socially patterned bodily responses alongside the socially produced relationship with the body may provide important knowledge on the genesis of health inequalities over the life course.