CARE OF OUR SELVES:
THE BODY, HEALTH AND
SEXUALITY

We mentioned in chapter 5 the potential tension between eroticism and sex. These matters, like the health and well-being of our bodies, are fundamental features of our everyday lives. We find ourselves routinely subject to adverts about dieting, exercise and holidays. In this process people can oscillate between wanting to be with others and wanting to be left alone, being concerned with their bodies and rejecting the call to be healthy with binges of eating and drinking, and expressing the desire to be close to those with whom they feel comfortable and at the same time, ‘getting away from it all’ by travelling to places where few people will bother them. These all express feelings of wanting to break or suspend a relation that is thought to be cumbersome, unwieldy, constraining, irritating or just too demanding for comfort. As we may oscillate between the desires for intimacy and solitude, so too we construct a relation with our bodies that is a fundamental part of our everyday existence.

In Search of Security

We have already noticed how vexing and enjoyable are our relations with other people. More often than not, they are complex and confusing, send contradictory signals and call for actions that are not easy to reconcile. Therefore, others not only provide security for our well-being, but also cause anxiety and this is not a pleasant condition – no wonder so many of us create strategies to avoid such situations. Having found confusion difficult to resolve and difficult to endure, we may feel an urge to cut the
strings which attach us to its source and wish to withdraw. However, where do we go? Where can we find the secure shelter we seek?

In answering these questions, let us think of the world around us – the places and people we know and believe we understand – as a series of concentric circles, each one being larger than the next. The circumference of the largest circle is blurred in our cognitive map: it is a misty, far away place. That circle contains the ‘great unknown’, lands that have never been visited and would not be without the assistance of a reliable guide, armed with a phrase-book and maps and supplied with insurance against the risks that such an adventure might entail. The smaller circles are safer and more familiar; the smaller they become, the safer they feel. There is, first, a place that is our country, where each passer-by is assumed to be able to speak the language we understand, obey the same rules and behave in a manner that is understood in such a way that we might know how to respond to their gestures and conversation.

A smaller circle may be called our ‘neighbourhood’. Here we know people by face, but mostly also by name and perhaps not simply by name, but also their habits. Knowing people’s habits reduces the uncertainty that comes with unfamiliarity and so we can know what we might expect from each person. Then last, but by no means least, there is an ‘inner circle’, quite small by comparison, that we might call ‘home’. Ideally, this is the place where all those differences between people, however deep they are, do not count for much, because we know that we can count on them all come what may; that they will stand by us through thick and thin and will not let us down. Here is the place where there is no need to prove anything, show a ‘true face’ and hide nothing. Home is often seen in these terms and regarded as a place of safety, warmth and security, where we can be sure of our place and our rights without fighting or keeping watch.

As with all neat definitions and presuppositions concerning clear boundaries that demarcate spaces and places, this is fine if it exists in the first place and then only as long as it continues to exist. Homelessness, family break-ups, the struggles between youth and older generations representing different cultural traditions and beliefs, appear not to exist as long as the boundaries between the circles are assumed to be clearly demarcated. If so, we know who we are, who are others, what are the expectations made of us and so where we stand in the order of things. We know what we may reasonably expect in each situation and which expectations would be illegitimate and presumptuous. However, what if the distinctions between the circles become blurred or even break down entirely? What if the rules which are in their right place in one circle leak into another, or are changing too fast and are too hazy to rely upon and to follow? Feelings of confusion and uncertainty, through to resentment and hostility, are the result. Where once clarity existed, ambivalence enters
and with a lack of certainty, fear can knock at the door, as equally can a reactionary attitude born of a lack of willingness to engage and understand.

Many have compared the past to the present in these terms. A nostalgia for tradition is one in which people knew their place and the expectations correspondingly placed upon them. Historical research has questioned the existence of these comfortable certitudes, but they persist via an appropriation of these imagined communities of bygone eras as a response to contemporary conditions. The world that was meant to be familiar and secure appears no more. The speed of change now appears to govern the conditions in which we live with people moving around quickly; those who were once intimately known disappear from view and new people enter, of whom little is known. The feeling is that if we could have once defined who we were in terms of where we lived and in what era, those resources have evaporated with changes that are driven by frenetic desires apparently devoid of meaning and purpose. Then, if rules seem to be changing rapidly and without notice, they no longer possess the legitimacy that must underpin their existence. Little can be taken-for-granted and what has been achieved, cannot be assumed to last long unless constantly refreshed by continuous effort. Careers for life become fleeting moments in the struggle for recognition that comes with every job application and interview. Even in the innermost, most homely of circles, vigilance is required. As these processes govern more of our lives, commodification can so easily turn that home of security into a house that is no more an object of exchange as with any other.

Of course, we exaggerate somewhat to illustrate. Yet there is much we assume which affords our security that many do not possess, nor have the means to acquire. At the same time, these processes affect relationships despite the prevalent belief that they are hermetically sealed off from social, political and economic influences. Take, for example, the most intimate of relations: the family or love partnership. Anthony Giddens coined the term ‘confluent love’ to describe the sentiments which hold the partnership together and ‘pure relationships’ to characterize the kind of partnership that is built on this foundation. Confluent love simply means that at one particular moment partners love each other, are attracted to each other and wish to stay together. For them, their partnership is pleasurable, satisfying and desirable. Nevertheless, there is no promise or guarantee that this agreeable condition will last ‘till death us do part’. Those things that flow together may also flow apart. If this occurs, the partnership itself, deprived of the basis that bound it together – it was, after all, a ‘pure’ relationship – will crumble. Confluent love, however, needs two, but to start drifting apart it is enough that the feelings of one begin to fade. Pure relationship, held together by confluent emotions, is therefore a brittle and vulnerable construction. Neither of the partners can be really
sure of the other, who may declare tomorrow that they do not feel like sharing lives and staying together. They need ‘more space’ and would rather seek that elsewhere. Partnerships that have no other basis never stop being on a ‘trial period’, with a series of daily tests without end. Such partnerships offer freedom of manoeuvre, for they do not bind the partners by timeless commitments, nor do they ‘mortgage the future’ of either. That said, the price to be paid for what some would call this ‘freedom’ is high – perpetual uncertainty and so a lack of security.

All this cannot help but influence the status of the family – an institution regarded as a source of stability and security. After all, the family is seen as a bridge between the personal and impersonal and between the mortality of its individual members and its immortality. Sooner or later a member may die, but their family, kin and lineage will outlive them; their legacy is to have perpetuated that lineage in some way. Nowadays, many families split up and then rearrange themselves in different contexts, or simply dissolve into other relationships. Nothing, therefore, is given and so more things become tasks that have to be performed in order to sustain them. Lynn Jamieson called this process disclosing intimacy in which what was once assumed becomes something that needs to be rendered explicit in order that the bonds that unite are routinely sustained within relationships.

At one level we can say that the place where we might feel secure is shrinking; few people, if any, enter it and stay long enough to elicit trust and confidence. At the same time, however, there are numerous ways in which the circles we have suggested are sustained within everyday life, with differing consequences for the partners within a relationship. The practices of ‘segmentation’ and ‘integration’ between home and work within relationships, for example, have been examined by Christena Nippert-Eng. While paid work was a place assumed to be separate from the home, new technologies have opened up possibilities in terms of the use of space and time. That, however, requires facing new pressures within relationships in order that space and time within the home is demarcated to enable the work in the first place. If the other partner does not recognize that and adjustments made accordingly, then conflicts are likely to be heightened. We should, therefore, be cautious in our embrace of the supposed new-found freedoms that the information revolution is supposed to provide. Household structures and the gendered divisions of labour within them can be, as Christine Delphy and Diana Leonard demonstrated in their study of marriage, extraordinarily resistant to change.

There is another issue. When we have spoken about the call that people make for their ‘own space’, what does this mean? If they get it, what is left? After all, if others are left outside and so they are apparently free of those who ‘get on their nerves’ and make ‘unreasonable demands’, what is left of the person who seeks such a place and what is the basis of this
demand? As we have argued throughout this book, we know ourselves through others and so, what is it to know ourselves and to what are we alluding when we make such a claim? One answer may lie in our embodied selves: that is, with reference to us as a ‘body’.

**Embodied Selves: Perfection and Satisfaction**

Let us pause here and reflect. This book is about the difference that living in society makes to what we do, how we see ourselves, objects and others, and what happens as a result. Yet our bodies are something we have ‘inherited’, fully made up by genes and thus not a ‘product’ of society. A belief in such immutability, however, is an error. Like anything else about us, the circumstance of living in society makes an enormous amount of difference to our bodies. Even if quite a lot in the size and form of our bodies and its other features has been determined by genes and so not by our own choices and intentional actions – by nature, not culture – societal pressures are such that we do all we can to bring our bodies to a condition that is recognized as being right and proper.

This process is dependent on the kind of society in which we live and whether we are at peace with our body. We may view our bodies as a task – something to work on which requires daily care and attention. Once working on our body has been formed into a duty, society sets the standards for a desirable and so approved shape, for what every body ought to do in order to proximate those standards. Failure to comply can induce feelings of shame, while those not meeting such requirements may find themselves subjected to routine discrimination: for example, prejudicial attitudes towards disabled people as manifest in the very design of buildings. However bizarre it may seem at first glance, our bodies are the objects of social conditioning. Therefore, their place in a book dedicated to ‘thinking sociologically’ is entirely legitimate.

Michel Foucault became interested in what he called ‘technologies of the self’ and how our relation to ourselves, and so our bodies, has changed over time. How we act upon our bodies and care for ourselves is not, of course, a matter that takes place within a social vacuum. Thus, as far as the care for the body is concerned, our society happens to be particularly demanding. Given the large volume of risk and uncertainty in the ‘world out there’, the body emerges as what we hope to be the last line in a set of defensible trenches. The body can become a trustworthy shelter because it is a site that we can control and so feel secure, unvexed and unharassed. Given the habit of the allegedly most stable and durable parts of the world ‘out there’ to hold all sorts of surprises in store – to vanish without trace or change beyond recognition – the body seems the least transient, the
longest living component of our lives. While all else may change, our bodies will always be with us! If investment, effort and expenditure carry a risk, it may be repaid in our bodies and similarly, it will be punished through our carelessness and negligence. A great deal hangs on the body as a result and sometimes more than some bodies can bear.

Fixing intense attention on the body has its advantages. Here is a site of activity that can produce real and tangible results by watching and then measuring the results. There is no shortage of health equipment to assist in this process: blood pressure and heart monitors, plus a wealth of dietary information, to name but a few. There is no need to be a sitting target for the card that fate may deal the body, for it can become the object of desire. Doing nothing feels worse – harrowing and humiliating – than doing something, even if that proves, in the long run, not to be as effective as you wished. Yet however much care and attention are devoted to the body, when are they sufficient? The sources of the anxiety that drives us toward such concerns will not go away for they derive from something external to the relationships with our bodies – the societies in which we live. The reasons for the run to shelter will always be with us and so the demands can have an appetite that is never satisfied.

This leaves us with several possibilities. The feeling of satisfaction we may derive from the success of one or other effort at improvement, for instance, may be momentary and in no time evaporate, to be replaced by self-criticism and self-reprobation. Instead of healing the wounds left by the fickle and uncertain world ‘out there’, our body may well turn into one more source of insecurity and fear. Once the body is turned into a defensive stockade, all the territory surrounding it and the roads leading to it tend to become the object of intense vigilance. We must be constantly on the watch: the body is on the attack or may come under assault at any moment, even if the enemy stays as yet hidden. You need to surround the fortress with moats, turrets and drawbridges and it must fall under our gaze twenty-four hours a day. Some of the infiltrators ‘settle in’ and pretend to be part of the body, while in fact they are not – they remain the aliens ‘inside’. For instance, fat, which we see as being ‘in the body’ but not ‘of the body’, is a good example of such a process. These crafty and deceitful traitors-in-waiting must be spied out, so that they may be ‘taken out of the system’ and ‘removed from circulation’. There is no shortage of services offering to round up, clean, deport and squeeze it out. Never, though, are lifestyles in general the subject of reflection, debate and potential transformation, for the entire project is based on the individualization and hence internalization, of social issues. Summer camps for overweight children become the answer, not the diets, lifestyles and consumption patterns of whole groups of people.

The ‘interface’ between the body and the rest of the world ‘out there’ tends to become the most vulnerable of the frontlines we need to defend
in our never-ending fight for security and safety. The border checkpoints – the orifices of the body, the passageways leading ‘inside the system’ – are precarious places. We should wish to watch closely what we eat, drink and breathe. Any food or air may do harm to the body or prove downright poisonous. It is not surprising, therefore, that we find a whole industry and set of marketing techniques that are part of the discourses of the body: for example, foods that are ‘good’ for us and others that are ‘bad’ for us. We should select the right kind of diet which is generous to the first and intolerant and harsh to the second, with many being on offer to fulfil these desires.

All this is easier said than done. Time and again we learn that the kinds of nourishment that were thought to be innocuous or even beneficial to the body have been found to have unpleasant side-effects, or even cause diseases. Such discoveries cannot but come as shocks since more often than not they are made after the fact, when the harm has already been done and cannot be repaired. The shocks leave lasting wounds on confidence: who knows which one of the foods now recommended by the experts will be in the future condemned as damaging? Any one of them may become so, thus no ‘healthy meal’ can be consumed without some degree of apprehension. No wonder that ‘new and improved’ diets run hard on the heels of the once favoured but now discredited ones and that allergy, anorexia and bulimia, all arising on the interface between the body and the ‘world out there’, have been described as disorders specific to our age. Allergy, as Jean Baudrillard observed, has wandering ‘points of attachment’ and is therefore difficult to pinpoint. This chimes well with the condition of diffuse and undefined anxiety which lies at the foundation of present-day concerns with the defence of the body.

If the care for the well-being of our bodies – understood as a vigilant prevention of contamination and/or degeneration – were the only motive guiding our action, then extreme reticence that borders on fasting would be a reasonable strategy to pursue. In this way we would reduce the ‘border traffic’ to a bare minimum by refraining from indulgence and refusing to consume those foods that are in excess of what is absolutely necessary to keep us alive. For many this is not a choice for they do not know whether they will obtain food on a daily basis. As a solution to those who enjoy such access, however, this is hardly acceptable, for it would strip the body of the major attraction it holds for its ‘owner’. Quite simply, the body is a site not only of anxiety, but also of pleasure and once again, we find an industry that prompts us to seek sensation: films, soaps, glossy magazines, commercials, books and shop windows tempt us into experiences whose absence may lessen the pleasure principle. Eating and drinking are social occasions that may induce pleasurable sensations and exciting experiences. To cut down on food and drink is to reduce the number of such occasions and so the interactions that accom-
pany them. Is it any wonder that on the list of the top twenty best-selling books you will probably find those on slimming and dieting, along with cookbooks with recipes for the most refined, exotic and sophisticated dishes?

We find a clash between two mutually contradictory motives that varies according to nations and gender, race and class. With the belief that biology is destiny for women and men tending to emphasize control and performance, for whom are these books intended and why? The body is often thought to be closer to nature than culture and whole modes of thought have unfolded that view the body as a source of mistrust. Thus, the seeking of pleasure in the body is something to be confessed by submitting ourselves to a higher authority. In the process, part of what we are is denied. These and other ways of thinking add to modes of inclusion and exclusion that surround what we may realistically hope for in our lives. The ability to enjoy food and reflect upon it, is also the capability to purchase it and be removed from the necessity of seeking food in order to survive. Similarly, surrounding ourselves with one or more of the growing armies of technicians of the body – such as personal trainers and dietary advisers – is based upon the same capabilities. For others, the ‘solution’ may come in a celebration of that which is commonly derided and they are determined to live with their bodies as they are and not turn them into objects of manipulation according to popular whim. A question is then raised: is all this healthy?

The Pursuit of Health and Fitness

If we are asked what we want to achieve when we take measures to protect our body, to train it and to exercise, we may well answer that we want to be more healthy and fit. Both aims are commendable. The problem is that they are different and sometimes at cross-purposes with each other. The idea of health, for instance, assumes that there is a norm that a human body should meet, with deviations being signs of imbalance, disease or danger. Norms have their top and bottom limits and so we can say that going over the upper level is, in principle, as dangerous and undesirable as falling below the lower level – for example, too high and too low blood pressure. Both call for medical intervention: for example, doctors are worried when there are too many leucocytes in the blood, but they also raise alarm when there are too few of them and so on.

We remain healthy if, and only if, we remain around a norm. The idea of health suggests the preservation of a ‘constant state’, with allowances for small fluctuations over time. Since we know, by and large, what the normal state is and so can measure it with some precision, we know what
to strive for as an ‘end state’. Taking care of our health may be quite time-consuming and aggravating and it often generates a good deal of anxiety, but at least we know how far we need to go and so there may be a happy end to our labours. Once told that we are back within an ‘acceptable norm’, we can be reassured that this is indeed the case by comparing the indices of our body and bodily functions with the statistics of the ‘averages’ for our age and sex.

The idea and practice of fitness seem to be a different story. There might be a bottom line, but the sky is the limit as far as the top line is concerned. Fitness is about transgressing norms, not adhering to them. Health is about keeping the body in a normal, functioning condition in order to work, earn a living, be mobile, engage in some kind of social life, communicate with other people and use the facilities that the society provides to serve various life tasks. However, when it comes to fitness the question may not be what the body must do, but what the body is ultimately capable of doing. The starting point is what it can do in its present state, but more can always be achieved and should in the name of fitness and so there is, or so it seems, no end in sight to the care for the fitness of our bodies.

The ideal of fitness takes the body as an instrument for reaching the kind of experience that makes life enjoyable, entertaining, exciting and altogether ‘pleasant to live’. Fitness stands for the capacity of the body to imbibe what the world has to offer now and what it may in the future. A flabby, tame, vapid body without vigour and appetite for adventure is unlikely to stand up to such challenge. Above all, such a body would not be one that desires new experiences and this is what makes life thrilling. An old proverb suggests that it is better to travel hopefully than to arrive. We may say, therefore, that in consumer societies it is the desire that matters, not its satisfaction. Quite simply, what desire desires is yet more desire. A fit body is an adroit and versatile body, hungry for new sensations, capable of actively seeking and meeting new sensations by ‘living them to the full’ when they appear.

Fitness is a key ideal by which the overall quality of the body is assessed. Since the body also conveys a message, it is not enough for the body to be fit, it must be seen to be fit. To convince its viewers, it must be slim, trim and agile and thus possess the look of a ‘sporting body’ that is ready for all sorts of exercise and able to take any amount of strain that life may throw at it. Again, the suppliers of commercial goods are eager to help the body to assume such appearances and to convey the impression of fitness. So we find a wide and constantly growing choice of jogging, gym- or tracksuits and training shoes to document the body’s love of exercise and its versatility. What is left to owners of the body is to find suitable shops with the right commodities and make the appropriate purchases.
Not all steps to a convincing presentation of bodily fitness are so simple and straightforward. There is a lot that the owners themselves must do: for example, weight training, jogging and playing sports are the most prominent among such tasks. Even in these cases, commercial suppliers are keen to oblige. There is a profusion of teach-yourself and do-it-yourself handbooks offering patented regimes and a huge variety of tinned, powdered or pre-cooked food made specially for the weight-lifters and fitness-watchers, to assist them in their solitary struggles. In this, as in other cases, the practice of doing things can so easily take second place to the art of shopping.

We witness here the pursuit of new sensations. The problem with all sensations, most prominently with sensual pleasures, is that they are known, so to speak, only from the ‘inside’. Sensations, subjectively experienced, may not be ‘visible’ to others and may be difficult to describe in a manner that allows others to understand them. There are visible signs of suffering such as sad expressions on the face, tears in the eyes, sorrowful sighs or sulking silences, and happiness in smiling faces, bursts of laughter, gaiety and sudden eloquence. It is possible for us to imagine these feelings by recalling our own ‘similar’ experiences. Yet we cannot feel what others experience. Intimate friends, who wish to share all the experiences they go through separately, often ask each other, impatiently and with a whiff of despair: ‘Do you really know what I feel?’ They suspect, with good reason, that there is no way to find out whether the feelings of two different persons are ‘the same’ or even ‘similar’.

Although we have suggested that bodily sensations are subjectively experienced and not thought to be available to others in terms of them being able to experience the same feelings, such sensations vary according to history and culture. As Rom Harré and Grant Gillett note in their study The Discursive Mind, historical research has shown that bodily feelings did not have much of a role in ideas of emotion among English speakers in the seventeenth century. Following those such as the Austrian-born British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who challenged the idea that there was an inner world of inaccessible experience within us all (not an ‘inner life’), language becomes the means through which we express sensations and emotions. Sensations are not simply the result of bodily stimulus, but also expressions of judgements, via language, that we make about our state of being. To that extent we have to learn ways to express such emotions and an understanding of their significance is available to others through local cultural displays and expressions. Thus, even the display of emotions is a social act that varies according to the repertoire of words and actions that are available within a given culture. Given this variation, we must also be sensitive to the cultures about which we speak in understanding the idea of ‘fitness’.

We have noted that the ultimate indices of fitness, unlike those of health,
cannot be measured. Therefore, the potential for interpersonal comparison becomes problematic. Again, there are a number of ways in which we can seek to measure our fitness via, for example, monitoring the heart rate during strenuous exercise. The comparison, however, may come in a running race or bodybuilding competition, but there is always room for improvement. The question that then arises with fitness, in terms of its differences with health, is ‘How far do we go?’ Have we squeezed out of this or that experience everything that other people do and we could have done ourselves? In the pursuit of ever greater targets, these questions are bound to remain unanswered, but that does not mean we shall cease to stop looking for answers. Whether our preoccupation with the body takes the form of the care for health, or fitness training, the overall result may be similar: more anxiety rather than less, even though the prime motive to turn our attention and effort to the body was our craving for certainty and security so blatantly missing in the world ‘out there’.

The Body and Desire

The body is not only the site and tool of desire, but also an object of desire. It is our body and at the same time, what other people see of our personhood. As the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it: ‘the body must become the thought or intention that it signifies for us. It is the body which points out, and which speaks’. The body is the site of our selves that is always on display and people tend to judge by what they can see. Even if the body is but a wrapping of what we take to be our ‘inner lives’, it is the attractiveness, beauty, elegance and charm of the wrapping that will entice others. How we manage our bodies is learnt while, at the same time, how others see us is also the product of common expectations. Deviations from these may cause reflection, as well as reaction in others, leaving those who are identified as being different at a disadvantage, despite the evident skills, abilities and contributions that they might otherwise make to a society. Thus, the shape of the body, the way it is dressed and made up and the way it moves, are messages to others.

Whether we find it easy or difficult to relate to other people and whether the others are willing or not to relate to us, depends on many factors – the message written by our bodies being one among many. If other people avoid us, if we are not a ‘social success’, if people with whom we would like to associate seem not to enjoy our company, or shun the prospect of lasting engagement, there might be something wrong with the messenger: our body. Perhaps, more to the point, there is something wrong with us as its owner, coach and guardian. Is the wrong kind of message being
displayed? Or the right message, but is not salient enough or even downright unintelligible? We may have read the clues in our social milieux incorrectly. Even ways of holding knives and forks and general bodily gestures during eating are infused with differing expectations.

We have now come full circle. We may have deployed our bodies to facilitate the vexingly confusing and insecure relations with other people, but now find that the body itself has become a source of trouble. With the body as a site of representation of ourselves, we may now have to return to the drawing board to consider another message to write, or find the way of making the present message more intelligible. It is, so we believe, the message that matters and there is nothing to stop us from writing any message we think to be right and proper. In the available repertoire there is no shortage of pre-scripted messages on offer. Indeed, our consumer-oriented society offers a multitude of 'presentation selves' to self-assemble.

The movie Elizabeth focused on the early years of the reign of Elizabeth I. She was perhaps the greatest monarch in English history, but found it exceedingly difficult to convince the courtiers and other high and mighty men that, as a woman, she was the proper heir to the glory of her father, Henry VIII. She sought to convince them that she had all the skills and understanding needed to rule the country with wisdom. The powerful royal ministers refused to treat her seriously for in their eyes she was just a bride-to-be, waiting for the right kind of husband who, once she married him, would be the true ruler of England. Significantly, Elizabeth dressed accordingly – the way the young women hoping to attract a 'Prince Charming' were expected to dress. During a moment in the film there comes a wondrous reincarnation. A transformed Elizabeth enters the Great Hall of the royal palace and all the courtiers and barons fall on their knees and bow. In so doing they acknowledge the monarch whose royalty they no longer doubt and whose right to rule they no longer dispute. How was this achieved?

Elizabeth changed her appearance. She had cut her long hair short, purchased huge jars of paint to cover her youthful face with a mask so thick that it disguised her emotions; she wore somber and sober dress and even managed to wipe the smile off her face. We, as the viewers of the movie, do not know whether Elizabeth herself had changed, but are aware that she had not changed her 'life-project': that is, a firm intention to rule England according to her own ideas and with the best of her abilities. The only thing we can be sure of is that the message sent to others by her appearance has altered. Elizabeth, it seems, sent the wrong messages and failed repeatedly, but once the right message was transmitted via her appearance, she was more successful in her quest.

We are repeatedly told such stories by all kinds of authorities. Various authorities do not necessarily see eye-to-eye when it comes to the selec-
tion of the content, but they all agree that whatever the content may be, it is the message that makes the difference between success and failure. With the body being the prime, immediately visible message, the exhibit of the self displayed for public gaze and scrutiny, it tends to be loaded with enormous responsibility for the ups and downs of social life. How aspects of our bodies are seen and endowed with particular significance effects how we see ourselves and how others see us. Our bodies, as objects of desire, are not simply tools for manipulation by some ‘inner-self’ of the mind, but are part of how we are constituted as selves through the reaction of others to our actions and from there, our anticipation of those responses.

In this process no aspect of the body is allowed to escape our attention and left, so to speak, to its own devices. We are responsible for every part and function of our bodies, with everything, or almost everything, having the potential to be changed for the better. This may or may not be true, particularly if we think of the ageing process, but even that is believed to be subject to change, or delay, via particular interventions. Therefore, as long as the body is a focus of constant and acute concern, its owner does not appear to be affected by the truth or untruth of that belief. What matters is that if something in our bodies, and especially in the appearance of our bodies, stops short of the ideal, the repairing of the situation seems to remain within our power to alter. In this way our bodies fluctuate between being objects of love and pride to sources of annoyance and shame. At one moment we might award our bodies for loyal service and at another, punish it for letting us down.

The Body, Sexuality and Gender

In the current climate, one aspect of our bodies that is calling for particular intense attention and care is sex. Our ‘sexual assignment’, like anything else concerning our bodies, is not a quality that has been determined at birth. We live in times of what Anthony Giddens termed ‘plastic sex’. ‘Being a male’ or ‘being a female’ is a question of art which needs to be learned, practised and constantly perfected. Moreover, none of the two conditions is self-evident, binding us throughout our lives and neither offers a clearly defined pattern of behaviour. As far as sexual identity is concerned, the body – whatever its inherited biological traits – appears as a set of possibilities. There are options to choose from in terms of sexual identity with the possibility being open for experimentation, thereby allowing one to be taken off and replaced with something else. The original and apparent fixity for all time of ‘sexual assignment’ is not a verdict of fate. Our sexuality, like other aspects of our bodies, is a task that is per-
formed. It is a complex phenomenon that includes not only sexual relations and practices, but also language, speech, dress and style. In other words, examining how sexuality is maintained and not simply given.

Sexuality is not productively seen in terms of an ‘essence’. This implies a questioning of what is known as the ‘essentialist’ approach to sexuality. The British sociologist Jeffrey Weeks defined that in terms of seeking to explain ‘the properties of a complex reality by reference to a supposed inner truth or essence’. That sexuality is not purely ‘natural’, but also a cultural phenomenon is not, however, a novelty of our time. Humans were always born with either male or female genital organs and male or female secondary bodily features, but at all times the culturally patterned, taught and learned habits and customs defined the meaning of being ‘male’ or ‘female’. Nevertheless, the fact that ‘maleness’ and ‘femininity’ is human-made, non-natural and so open to change was suppressed for the most part of human history.

In this historical unfolding, culture appeared in the mask of nature and cultural inventions were seen as being on the same level with ‘laws of nature’. Men were made to be men, women to be women and that was the end of the story. Nothing was left to human will and skill but to obey and live according to one’s ‘true’ nature. After all, what nature has decided, no man (and particularly no woman) may alter! Who spoke in the name of nature was rarely contested. However, there were exceptions who are often silenced from histories. In 1694, for example, Mary Astell wrote *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. In this she argued that differences between the sexes were not based on unexamined ideas of ‘nature’, but on the power that men held over women in society.

For much of human history, hereditary distinctions in human bodies were employed as building materials to sustain and reproduce social hierarchies of power. This remains the case in terms of ‘race’ whenever the colour of skin is defined as a sign of superiority or inferiority and then used to explain and justify existing social inequalities. The same applies to sexual differences. Here we find biological distinctions between sexes forming the basis for gender inequality. ‘Gender’ is a cultural category. It entails the totality of norms which members of the two sexual categories are obligated to conform in their performance of masculinity and femininity. Gender classifies, divides and separates via a stipulation of social activities that are considered proper or improper for each category.

It is on the basis of such a history that women may be excluded from areas of social life that are reserved for men, or that barriers are placed in the way of their participation as, for example, in politics or business. At the same time, those activities that are fundamental to society, such as reproduction, household duties and childcare, were cast aside as an exclusively feminine domain and devalued accordingly. This is not a division of labour simply given by different reproductive functions; it stands
for power relations that tend to be slanted in favour of men. For instance, within organizations, as the Italian sociologist Silvia Gherardi reminded us, the position of subordination entailed by being a member of the second sex is reinforced in rituals surrounding the management of the body. This may be seen in those instances when the boss leaves the office heading for a meeting, followed by his secretary a few steps behind.

The feminist movement has challenged social inequalities based on sexual characteristics of the body. This lengthy campaign has brought its results, but legislation alone cannot achieve equality. The most it can do is to reopen for negotiation those cases previously considered ‘unproblematic’. There are no sex-bound limits to which women or men must confine their life-aspirations and claims to social standing, but the question as to which of these are eventually fulfilled is often left to individual ingenuity and persistence, with the resulting effects being carried by the individuals concerned.

It is not quite clear what the effects of a shift in sexual attitudes are for the individual frame of mind and feeling. Some observers, for instance the German sexologist Volkmar Sigush, expressed concern in the following terms:

The shadows cast by feelings of anxiety, disgust, shame, and guilt became so large and dark that many women, and consequently many men as well, saw no remaining ray of light whatsoever. Feelings of closeness, joy, tenderness, and comfort seemed doomed to suffocation in a . . . storm cloud of hate, anger, envy, bitterness, vengeance, fear, and fright.

If these circumstances predominate, then the ‘fulfilment of the sexual potential of the body’ becomes a more difficult task and transforms sex, and most human intercourse with it, into another source of insecurity and fear, as opposed to their potential for greater security and contentment.

Summary

As with those other topics we have considered, care of ourselves through our bodies, as well as those bodies being the objects of desire and display to others, holds out the hope for security, but is also a site of insecurity. This, in its turn, is infused with meanings that are produced within cultures that are not simply separated from biological categories, but interact and construct what we are, have been and possess the potential to become. With this comes the power to define which may be a source of comfort, but also something to resist in its invoking of norms that stifle difference. As a result, such differences are often translated as deviance, rather than being understood on their own terms and challenging for the
dominant ways in which the body is considered, acted upon and deployed as a form of communication. Sexual relations then become areas of intense negotiation with results that are often unpredictable. Surrounding all of this, however, is a need for the toleration of difference.