



'Bodies (that) matter': the role of habit formation for identity

Maren Wehrle¹ 

Published online: 29 September 2020
© The Author(s) 2020

Abstract

This paper will interpret Judith Butler's theory of performativity and materialization as a theory of identity, and so put it into dialogue with a phenomenological account of habit formation. The goal is to argue that identity is developed already at a bodily level and that this takes place via the processes of habit formation. The constitution of subjectivity, in other words, requires at the most basic level some kind of bodily performativity. What follows intends to draw out the concept of 'the body' in Butler's work, the role of which is surprisingly meagre given her clear favour of language signification in the elaboration of her theory of performativity. Alternatively, this paper will provide a phenomenology of habit formation that re-introduces the body not as thematic materiality, but as lived materiality. The body will therefore be conceived as something which is already skilful and creative, sensitive and vulnerable, and ultimately, as Butler anticipates, responsive to the intertwinement of individual and social aspects of identity formation. In this regard, I will argue for a performative theory of (bodily) habitual identity.

Keywords Embodiment · Habit · Identity · Performativity · Phenomenology · Butler

1 Introduction

In this paper, I will read Judith Butler's theory of performativity and of materialization as a theory of identity.¹ In this sense, I want to take seriously the idea that identity is not the

¹In the following I will use the term identity in two different meanings. With regard to Butler, one can speak of identity as identification with something (an already existing category of identity), thus in the sense of a group identity. This corresponds to the top-down approaches in the way I define them. In the second part, I refer to identity as a kind of individualisation (or typification). Here 'identity' means a stable and recognisable form, unity or constancy of behaviour, that is, a certain style of being in the world, which is formed through bodily practices and repetition. This corresponds to the bottom-up approach and the notion of the operative/living body.

✉ Maren Wehrle
wehrle@esphil.eur.nl

¹ Erasmus School of Philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

expression of a prefigured essence or stable core, but indeed dependent on ‘performances’, that is, on what we do. Performativity amounts neither to a humanist or postmodern voluntarism, nor to a strict (social) determinism, as Butler herself emphasizes. Rather, performativity is situated between these dualities: between being acted upon and acting; the social and the individual; passivity and activity. Although Butler herself theorizes performativity merely as a linguistic process of signification or citation through which bodies or subjects are made intelligible, her general idea of performativity (or the materialization of identity) shows many links with the concept of habit formation to be found in the philosophical, and more specifically, phenomenological tradition.

Indeed, what I want to suggest here is that it might be fruitful to complement Butler’s account of performativity with a phenomenological account of habit formation. This could render concrete her rather abstract theory of signification and citation by showing how social norms concretely shape bodies in material and phenomenological terms. This means not merely the way they are categorized as either intelligible (matter) or object (no matter), but how norms through habituation literally become part of what one is or becomes. In this sense, one could not only investigate why some ‘terms’ of bodies matter, while others not, but take the matter of bodies seriously, that is, investigate how specific bodily subjects themselves experience, are affected, enabled or constrained by those norms, why they might desire to preserve them or are motivated to resist them, and to what extent they are able to do so. Moreover, this comparison could throw light on pre-linguistic forms of identity formation, and on how they might relate to and even found explicit forms of identification. Therefore, I will assume that identity is developed already at a bodily level and that this takes place via the processes of habit formation. The argument will follow that such a constitution of identity or subjectivity provides a specific form of *bodily performativity* which in turn corresponds to a *habitual identity*.

My aim is to integrate top-down perspectives that critically investigate how specific identity categories affect particular bodies, and how they can react to this, with bottom-up perspectives that try to define the necessary role of the body for basic forms of identity in general. In the following, I take Butler’s account of performative gender identity as an example of a top-down perspective in that she critically investigates how particular bodies are (forced) to assume an already constituted set of socio-cultural identity categories (e.g. the hetero-sexual matrix). This does not mean, however, that she has nothing to say about how individual bodies take on, performatively change, subvert or resist these categories. On the contrary, in assuming the phenomenological idea of the ‘body as situation’ after Simone De Beauvoir, Butler formulates a theory of performativity as a twofold phenomenon: being passively situated and having to actively take on the situation (Butler 1986).² Subjective or bodily action thereby appears as something of a *re-action* in which respective norms are reworked or resisted.

Typical bottom-up accounts, however, such as (genetic) phenomenological investigations or accounts of enactive and embodied cognitive science, abstract from the

² Feminist (e.g. Simone de Beauvoir, Iris Marion Young, Gail Weiss), queer/transgender (e.g. Sara Ahmed, Gayle Salamon) or post-colonial phenomenological analyses (e.g. Frantz Fanon, Linda Martin Alcoff, Alia Al Saji) can be read as examples of such investigations, also referred to as ‘critical phenomenology’ (cf. Weiss et al. 2019). These studies tend to more concretely describe how this situatedness is lived through and experienced by the respective individuals, whereas Butler mostly sticks to the general statement that gender is something which we ‘put on’ in and through our daily activities without specifying how the body is exactly involved in this ‘putting on’ or reworking in concrete terms (Butler 1988, 531).

concrete (social) situation and start with an investigation of levels of cognition and experience. In this regard, they focus mostly on lower and practical levels of cognition, like passive (temporal organization of consciousness), perceptual and bodily dimensions of experience. Their aim is to explain how higher, reflective levels of experience and cognition, which includes thinking and language, are grounded in more basic and pre-reflective dimensions of experience.

While a top-down account is directed at potentially constraining aspects of identity (i.e. forced identification with a pre-established identity category) and possibilities of resistance against it, bottom-up accounts emphasise the enabling and necessary aspects of habitual identity formation. Here, processes of incorporation, habitualization and typification enable an unanimous and meaningful experience, grant possibilities of action in the sense of a bodily 'I-can' and facilitate intersubjective interactions. Such a bottom-up approach aims at describing and understanding how (any) identity can be formed via bodily practices.

For both lines of research, it is crucial to understand that the body is more than 'mere matter' or some 'known concept', but also is experienced as something material – the lived body. The moving, experiencing, and perceiving body or embodied subject is what is in constant interaction with the environment and others. In this relation, it develops a more or less flexible or persistent perceptual style and typical ways of inhabiting and comporting, what can be called, a *habitual identity*.

Divided into two parts, this paper will first critically discuss Butler's top-down account of performativity, both its achievements and limits with regard to the body (2), and then complement it with a bottom-up phenomenological account of habit formation, to ultimately apply this and discuss the concrete intertwining of individual and social factors of identity (3). First, I will introduce a phenomenological account of habit foregrounding the notion of identity as habitual identity (3.1). Second, I will apply this to Butler's idea of performativity to make concrete the effects of social norms and power relations on bodies, and how bodies affirm, transform and resist them (3.2). I will thereby defend both a weak and strong claim of habitual identity. Respectively, performative bodily practices are needed to acquire a stable identification with existing norms, making room also for the possibility of their individualization and transformation. On top of this, bodily performativity can be deemed necessary for every higher form of identity formation, and thus foundational apropos conceptual and linguistic forms of signification and identification. In this way, I seek to affirm the general need for identity formation as institution of constancy (or unity) and individuality (bottom-up), while maintaining the particular impact of historical, social and political circumstances (top-down). By way of conclusion, I make a plea for an investigation that combines both a bottom-up and top-down approach to identity formation.

2 Bodies that don't matter enough?

2.1 Butler's account of identity qua performativity

Butler's work is best known for the well-debated claim that gender is performative. In her books, *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* (Butler 1990, 1993), she develops a

theory of discursive performativity inspired by Austin's speech act theory (Austin 1962) and Derrida's concept of citationality.³ By way of performativity, Butler challenges the view that sex or gender is a pre-fixed essence or an epistemologically graspable 'nature'. Both publications were followed by critical and polemic discussions about the status of biological sex, materiality and embodiment. Some readers have even gone so far as to argue that Butler denies the material or biological existence of bodies, especially with the claim that gender is something we can somehow choose. Overlooked in these debates, however, is that Butler's account of performativity is primarily an account of forced identity formation and of the possible subversive mechanisms taken up and deployed under these restrictive circumstances; in other words, her account is an analysis of the producing and excluding powers of social norms specifically with regard to the binary heterosexual matrix.

In this regard, her work stands in the tradition of Simone de Beauvoir's phenomenological insights which culminate around the point: one is not born but becomes woman (De Beauvoir 1949/2011; Butler 1986). De Beauvoir famously argues that female identities are not the instantiations of some universal essence of the feminine, rather, they are directly related to their specific material and social situation as well as to everyday bodily practices. Although one find phenomenological concepts like sedimentation, and situation in Butler's early analyses, a concrete phenomenological analysis that invokes bodily practices and their performative capacities is conspicuously absent.⁴ In her later and most prominent formulation of performativity, Butler then decides to focus predominantly on linguistic performances and discursive appellations.

Because Butler's description of performativity in *Gender Trouble* provoked a plethora of divergent interpretations, she introduced the concept of the 'materialization' of norms in her later work *Bodies that Matter*. She wanted to make clear that performativity meant neither that we can freely choose our gender (because it depends on what we do or say voluntarily), nor that we are fully determined by a prevailing discourse or norm. In this context, Butler argues that the distinction between gender and sex as the distinction between a social phenotype and its corresponding genotype is misleading. Rather, gender and sex are something that materialize gradually through

³ Butler refers to J.L. Austin to point out how language can actually produce real world effects and thus have an ontological impact. In *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), Austin differentiates between perlocutionary speech-acts that produce real-world effects as their consequence and illocutionary speech-acts that literally 'say what they do', for example, spoken or written orders or legal statements, like the minister who joins two people in marriage, or the judge who proclaims his decision over a court trial. Butler understands this performative force of language with Derrida as a process of citationality and with Lacan as a citing of the symbolic order or law (Derrida 1988). Sex is then assumed within repeated acts of interpellation in which the symbolic order or law is cited (Lacan 1978, 1985). As a correct citation or identification can fail, the symbolic order produces abject bodies, i.e. bodies that don't matter.

⁴ Already in her early phenomenological texts on performativity, Butler shows an overly intellectualist reading of phenomenological concepts. For example, she defines 'the body as situation' in De Beauvoir's and Merleau-Ponty's work merely in cultural and discursive terms, that is, as the 'cultural field of interpretation'. Being-situated means, for Butler, being the "locus for cultural interpretation", while being-in-situation means, that the body has to "take up" and "interpret the received interpretations" (Butler 1986, 45). In this respect, she seems to ignore the existential insight that one is embedded in a world with concrete material circumstances (that is a natural as well as culturally shaped environment) that determine one's concrete practical possibilities and actions (i.e. the body-schema), not merely the interpretation of one's body (i.e. the body-image). A similar mis-reading of this phenomenological dimension can arguably be seen in her interpretation of Fanon's work (cf. Ewara 2020).

acts of interpellation or signification which represent prevailing normative frameworks. The exemplar, for Butler, is gender identity formation. Concretely, materialization happens through repeated performative acts of naming and signification. These significations begin even before the birth of a baby and continue in repeated acts of naming the respective gender, achieving ultimately a stabilization of the gender-identity. Within the dominant 'heterosexual matrix', the norms of binary genders comes to *materialize* into female and male bodies, which accordingly identify with them. The biological category of sex is thereby an effect produced within the performative game of signification. This effect – the illusion that there is a pure, natural, bodily substrate underneath every form of gender identity that in turn verifies it – helps in turn to stabilize and thereby to sediment the heterosexual matrix.

Broadly-speaking, Butler's performative account of identity reads as both overly deterministic or too voluntaristic. The reason for this is to be found in the two conflicting theoretical strands that characterize her theory of performativity, one inspired by Derrida, the other by Lacan (Lacan 1978; Lacan 1985). The first strand presents identity formation as a process of citationality: here, identity materializes gradually while continuously transgressing its former meaning. The second strand understands identification as an exclusionary force, as a discursive 'inside' that produces its own discursive 'outside'. While the first sketches a gradual and open picture of identity formation, the latter sketches an antagonistic and rigid picture whereby identification is an exclusionary practice with the result of either the right (normative) identity or no identity at all. A brief reflection on both provides insight into the ambiguity of identity formation qua performativity and the limits of this.

Gender signification is necessarily unstable and fragile. The repetition, necessary to preserve a prevailing normative matrix, is also that which transforms it. In this regard, Butler relies on Derrida's idea of citationality whereby every use of language or expression of linguistic meaning is considered a form of citation. Even though such citations are deeply dependent on and determined by already established meanings, they cannot be reduced to it. It is neither an identical reproduction, nor an invention *ex nihilo*, but a translation into new circumstances of usage, where those meanings might transform. When we cite something, we necessarily 'break it' or 'cut it out' of an original context in order to transfer it to a new one, thereby prompting a change of meaning, whether it be ever so slight or radical. Linguistic discourses are thus neither stable nor fixed, but remain always fragile and open to transformation. This goes to show that one is not entirely passive or determined by the respective normative frameworks – in fact, one has to actively appropriate them. Within this processes of appropriation lies the possibility for subversions of meaning, like in parody.

However, while the fact that we have to repeat or cite is a necessary condition for potential change, it is clearly not a sufficient one (cf. Allen 1999, 72). This potential is highly dependent on the respective circumstances. Another problem, one that it is not quite so clear, concerns whether this subversive potential is more of a side-effect of language-use or can it be the result of intentional and strategic use. Next to the focus on the fragile or subversive aspects of identity formation, that by some were interpreted as postmodern voluntarism (Bourdieu 1990, Bordo 1993), Butler emphasizes the productive force of norms or power relations, which by others were understood as overly deterministic (Benhabib 1995). Before Butler, Foucault brought to our attention the processes of 'normation' or normalization that do not simply influence a pre-existent

natural body in a retroactive manner, but actually constitute the bodies of soldiers, pupils, workers, etc. (Foucault 1995). Butler arguably both radicalizes and weakens Foucault's line of argument. Although she claims that the materialization of these norms literally produces the subject itself, the notion of materialization and the subject it produces appear to be reduced to the mere linguistic claims.⁵ Butler aims to provide a dynamic account of matter, in which matter is not a mere static bedrock (*hyle*) that awaits its *form*, but gradually materializes within and through processes of signification (Butler 1993, 3). She nonetheless fails to conceive of matter as anything more than passive; the dynamic quality of her account of gender identity lies in the linguistic signification of matter.

Following Lacan, Butler notes how the product of this materialization, which is expressed as a successful or unsuccessful identification with the norm (the symbolic order or law), is the properly identified (legal) subject, which is either 'man' or 'woman'. If the materialization of norms 'fail', so to speak, and an individual falls outside the heterosexual order, then their body is in a very real sense a body that does not *matter*: i.e., a body without meaning, intelligibility or identity. But, Butler does not actually describe the content of (material) bodies or of matter, only *how bodies come to matter*. In this respect, she epistemologically addresses the problem of how and which bodies become intelligible under existing normative frameworks. This is because bodies are only epistemologically accessible when they have already acquired an identity and so, fall under an established identity category. Bodies that fail to appear as meaningful, then mark the mere limit or outside of the respective normative matrix. These non-normative bodies are considered to have a subversive potential in that they be able to 'trouble' or 'disrupt' the established system (Butler 1993, 4). Butler is hesitant to posit an absolute outside to the discourse or symbolic order, however. She understands this outside as produced by the same normative order and so, as functioning only in relation to it (Butler 1993, 8).

There are some problems to be found with both the deterministic and the voluntaristic reading of Butler. Most pertinently, identity formation is conceptualized merely in the negative. When bodies do matter (i.e., have an identity within the limits of the intelligible), then this 'mattering' or identity results from a violent production, the effect of a "forcible iteration" or "citation of norms" (Butler 1993, 2, 120, 232). When bodies do not matter, they fall outside the limits of intelligibility altogether. Performativity, for Butler, thus seems to presupposes a constraint that motivates the very processes of repetitive performance. Such an antagonistic framework results in an 'either/or'

⁵ This epistemological claim is not unlike the phenomenological one that experience has to be coherent and concordant (or normative and normal) if one wants to call it a meaningful experience. Of course, it would be absurd to postulate two worlds: There is but one world, namely, the one that 'meaningfully' appears to us. However, and here the phenomenologist would arguably be critical of Butler, this appearance cannot be entirely determined by existing discourses, norms or worldviews. The phenomenologist actually tries to bracket these worldviews, not in order to deny them or in the naïve belief one can get rid of them, but to be able to thematize them and their impact on sense experience. Nonetheless, the phenomenological paradigm is 'so viel Schein, soviel Sein' (So much appearance, so much being, Husserl 1960, 103), meaning, that a reference to being or truth is only possible within this very experience, and does not reside in some speculative underlying realm of the 'real' (Lacan) or an ideal like the 'Ding an sich' (Kant). Within appearance, being or matter is presenting itself – albeit, always partially – in the flesh, and confronts us with its transcendence, obduracy, and resistance. In the temporal course of our appearance, we have to fulfill and correct our former intentions, and thus reality – ideally-speaking – functions as a *constant corrective* to our former appearances.

conception of identity: either one succeeds in materializing the respective norm or one has no identity at all. In this context, identity is thus a “forcible reiteration” or “sedimented effect of a ritual practice” (Butler 1993, 10; see also: 22, 63, 214). It conceals its very becoming and presents itself as natural, and hence as a necessary and unchangeable essence. Everyone who does not fit into the prior binary norm must therefore, by definition, be considered unnatural and abnormal, that is, as either pathological, perverse or criminal. Although Butler herself avoids any normative claims, the subversion of such exclusionary identities are in turn conceived as an ethical aim rooted in the fragility of language in linguistic citationality.

The repetition immanent to linguistic citationality makes possible the *re-signification* of norms in any order; in every citation, there is the possibility for transformation. An absolute inclusion of all identity forms into the realm of intelligibility is not the desired aim, however, at least according to Butler. This is because every order requires an outside or limit that has the possibility to ‘trouble’ or to ‘disrupt’ the respective order. In this regard, Butler offers an antagonistic strategy which consists of the *de-subjectivication* of or resistance to identification. If we take re-signification and de-subjectivication as mere intrinsic contingencies within the processes of signification and identification, then this would sketch an overly deterministic picture. Subversion, in this framework, would be conceived merely as an arbitrary effect of social systems. And yet, if we were to understand re-signification as an explicit strategy of subversion, this seems overly optimistic. Would we not then have the power to engage in de-signifying strategies and to deny any form of identification altogether? Both strategies therefore seem unsuited for the everyday life of individuals – perhaps it is only an option for privileged academics who are not necessarily in need of social acceptance and recognition (Allen 2013; Ahmed 2014, 152).

In her recent book, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler does make note of this ambivalence. Here, she argues that every account of performativity is comprised of a *dual dimension* (Butler 2015, 63) and so, she differentiates between a first and second stage of performativity.⁶ The first represents the more determinist or ‘normalizing’ aspect (e.g., gender assignment), in which the subject is nominally passive, and the second represents the more voluntarist one, which arrives later in the process, along with the capacity “to reproduce those norms in ways we might chose” (Butler 2015, 63). But, does such choice not itself rely on the internal possibility of subversion in the process of norm repetition? For Butler, an explicit re-signification or a ‘queering’ of norms thus presupposes the intrinsic ‘queering’ power of language in which the iteration of norms must take the form of a citation. Performativity thus describes both the “process of being acted upon” and the “conditions and possibilities for acting” (Butler 2015, 63).

Although this later work clarifies some of the ambiguities of her earlier writings, and explicitly emphasizes the role of the (material) body, it leaves the main points of criticism in regard to identity intact: a) identity is defined in negative terms; b) identity formation or resistance is still mostly described in terms of linguistic signification. While identity formation is a passive inscription, activity or agency can only be found in the resistance of an assigned identity category. Butler’s analysis shows the intrinsic

⁶ In this, she returns to her original formulation in relation to De Beauvoir as being situated (passively) and in-situation (actively taking on this situation), cf. Butler 1986.

violence of these processes of signification and classification, who try to fixate a fluent identity formation into an overtly stable category. Although this is a crucial critique of the danger of *all* forms of identity politics and -isms, whose political relevance I cannot do justice here, as a general theory of identity formation it does not suffice. Identity appears here as the mere opposite of any form of individual freedom or agency and so, seems to exclude any positive account of individual or collective identity. On the one hand, Butler's theory seems *too weak* (or voluntaristic) in that she reduces identity formation to an interpellation or interpretation, that is, to a performance, described in linguistic terms; on the other, her theory seems *too strong* (or deterministic) as she develops no positive account of bodily agency that is non-reflective within these processes.

When we take the claim seriously that identity is performative, it cannot be reduced to a thematic process of identification or to a mere psychological attachment within a symbolic order.⁷ Rather, one should look at the concrete ways in which bodies are shaped by and rework social norms. Therefore, I pose the question of the body again in all these respects, because, at least from a phenomenological perspective, it still seems that (lived) bodies don't matter enough.⁸

2.2 With and beyond Butler: Bodily performativity as identity formation

So, then, if performativity was considered linguistic, how do bodily acts become performative? Norms are not simply imprinted on us (...). Rather, they inform the lived modes of embodiment we acquire over time, and those very modes of embodiment can prove to be ways of contesting those norms, even breaking with them. (Butler 2015, 63).

In her recent writing of *Notes*, Butler outlines the dual dimension of performativity and, in doing so, introduces the question of embodied experiences and actions as performative once again. Here, she investigates 'concerted actions' and the 'physical assembly of bodies' and defines them as pre-linguistic forms of, not only normalization (i.e., bodies that are affected), but also expression and resistance (i.e., bodies that can affect). Every affect thus implies a general bodily affectability. The signifying function of the body cannot therefore be reduced to the discursive realm as bodies appear to express norms in their own way, beyond language. In this regard, she poses two related, but different questions: a) to what extent are speech-acts simultaneously bodily acts (i.e. embodied); and b) how does, on the one hand, linguistic performativity (or discourse) shape and constitute bodies and, on the other, do bodies exceed and contest those linguistic norms (cf. Wehrle 2020). Butler does state that the two – linguistic

⁷ In *The Psychic Life of Power* Butler explains why we are psychologically attached to the very norms that acted (violently) on us even when they institute a situation of oppression (Butler 1997a). In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sarah Ahmed follows this line of argument and shows how we are not only 'acted upon', but get emotionally invested in social norms and aim at their preservation in order to feel 'comfortable' or 'oriented' (Ahmed 2014).

⁸ Butler refers to critics who have repeatedly posed this question and formulated it like this: "What about the materiality of the body, Judy?" Butler adds to this: "I took it that the addition of 'Judy' was an effort to dislodge me from the more formal 'Judith' and to recall me to a bodily life that could not be theorized away" (Butler 1993, ix).

performativity and bodily performativity – are not altogether distinct, but overlap. Most remarkably, Butler describes their relation as 'chiasmic', which, taken from the late phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, refers to the intertwining of two structures or modes of being (Merleau-Ponty 1968). But rather than treating them as two equally important modes of being that are intertwined, bodily performativity still appears as secondary, i.e. something that adds to or exceeds language (Butler 2015, 8).

What is striking here, as in her earlier phenomenological works, is Butler's rather dualistic framework of (material) bodies on the one hand and symbolic signification or cultural interpretation of these bodies on the other. However, if we regard living bodies as socially situated, there is more to social norms or sociality than frameworks of signification, and there is more to bodies than either their (resistant) materiality or their being objected to acts of signification. Sociality and bodies are concretely intertwined, because they are both material and lived, visible and meaningful. I will discuss both of these points in turn.

Already Foucault and others like Pierre Bourdieu emphasized that neither power relations nor the workings of social norms can be reduced to the linguistic realm. They express themselves in practices, rituals, social conventions, institutions; in these ways, they affect bodily subjects directly even when they are not formulated in explicit terms, such as in written or oral discourse. In a response to Bourdieu's criticism, Butler argues that, epistemologically, one cannot strictly differentiate between the linguistic and the social, as the social meaning of the body is produced by an interpellation that is ultimately linguistic. However, even if there is no epistemological access to something social, purified of all linguistic meaning, this by no means is an argument to reduce the social to the linguistic realm as the linguistic is neither a necessary nor a sufficient criteria to explain sociality. If one decided to stay within the discursive epistemological framework, they would have to remain silent on everything that exceeds the limits of intelligibility (freely applying early Wittgenstein's point). This means one has to stick to a mere conceptual or legal definition of 'body' or 'subject' within an already established normative framework or symbolic order. Such a linguistic monism, however, tends to be rather static, as it only knows an inside or outside of social intelligibility, and does not allow us to thematize how the symbolic order (and its social norms) originally developed or, indeed, how different symbolic orders (do and could) emerge. In short, there is more to sociality than an already established symbolic order. Viewed from a more bottom-up perspective, sociality can be understood as the material and linguistic sedimentation of concrete intersubjective interactions or institutions of meaning (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2010). The 'social' appears here as the result of prior concrete interactions, in the same way as proper intersubjectivity and linguistic communication appear as founded on intercorporeity, and more basic forms of bodily expression and gesture (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 405ff; Walsh 2020).

This point, however, makes a broader perspective on performativity necessary that includes bodies not as merely reacting to or resisting established norms, but also as bodily agents who participate in developing these norms. Therefore, instead of asking how bodies (or matter) exceed or contest language or interpellation, or "how linguistic acts become bodily" (Butler 1997b, 41), and thus addressing bodily performativity in a top-down manner, it might be more fruitful to also investigate how bodily experience and action can be in themselves performative.

From a first-person-perspective, (human) bodies are both, living subject (sensing, moving) and material object (perceivable, extended) (cf. Husserl 1989, 151–170, Merleau-Ponty 2012, Plessner 2019). Because of the intertwining of the living and the material (the *Leibkörper*, as Husserl explicitly puts it), embodiment is characterized as both vulnerable and active. We can only move and perceive because we have a material extension and standpoint, and we are only vulnerable, because we feel our materiality (and the way it can be deformed and affected) from within (Al Saji 2010a, 22). Thus, as *Leibkörper*, we experience our materiality and its conditions as either pleasurable or unpleasurable, enabling or constraining.

Descriptively, one can distinguish here between (a) the lived (or operative) body, which involves the experiencing and acting body together with its proprioception, the immediate knowledge of its position, location as well as the acquired abilities and its sedimented history of experience, and (b) the perceived or thematized body. This distinction corresponds respectively in turn to the distinction between the body schema and the body image (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2012, 100–101; Gallagher 2005a, 2005b).⁹ In her account of embodiment, Butler seems to focus almost entirely on the body as perceived, evaluated or known (by oneself and others via respective cultural and normative frameworks), but not as a perceiving, moving and operating bodily subject. This is why I suggest that she does not ascribe an inherent performativity to the body.

From the perspective of the lived or operative (and thus non-thematic) body, we are constantly engaged with our environment. Through exploration, repeated movement and interaction with the environment and with other subjects, we constantly develop individual and lasting ways of moving and behaving; acquired habits and skills allow us to quickly orientate, optimize and facilitate our daily life, while bodily movement, expression and interaction also create a playful and enjoyable relation to the world. These performances of the body, so I want to argue here, have ontological relevance in that they can create real and lasting changes in the bodies as well as their environments. The lived body thus represents in a literal manner the ‘I can’, that is, not only our present bodily condition, but our practical bodily possibilities (cf. Husserl 1989, 159).

However, this *performative force* is far from being a voluntary intention or goal-directed action. On the contrary, the workings of the operative and lived body in action with its *body schema* – the implicit and immediate knowing how of its form and position with regard to the environment as well as its acquired skills – is essentially characterized through its *anonymity*. Within our body schema, we do not only carry our own history of past experiences, but also the dispositions and sediments of a biological, evolutionary, generative or cultural history, therefore, we are not only individual, but also part of a “general existence” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 86).

Furthermore, as bodily subjects, we are situated in and inhabit a social world and concretely incorporate the meanings and norms of this world. These social norms do not only constitute the image that we have of our bodies, as successful or failed identification with norms in Butler’s sense. They also shape in a more direct manner who we are and determine what we do and experience. In this sense, the ‘I can’ of the lived body, the general possibility of free movement and its individual practical

⁹ Gallagher defines the body schema as a “system of processes that constantly regulate posture and movement – a system of motor-sensory capacities that function below the threshold of awareness, and without the necessity of perceptual monitoring” (Gallagher 2005a, 234; cf. Gallagher 2005b, 24).

possibilities, is always both *practical* and *social*, in that it acquires habits and skills that can be useful, but also disadvantageous, enabling but also constraining, within a certain socio-political context. This is why, concretely (that is from a top-down perspective), the 'I can' of the body can easily turn into a '*I cannot*' if the bodily constitution, its habits and skills, do not fit certain social and political circumstances (cf. Weiss 1999, 2015, Young 2005). In general, every bodily subject undergoes a certain kind of *situated embodiment and habit formation*, which can, depending on the circumstances, be enabling or constraining in its own manner.

The fact that all living bodies are performative, that is, are situated and in-situation, thereby entails that every possible bodily experience is performative in both an active and a passive manner. In the first sense, this means that our bodies are *generally* able to acquire new skills, inhabit their environment, thereby creating sensual or practical 'norms' (rules), that is an individual style of interaction. In the second sense, our bodies are *concrete* material, visible and situated bodies, and are thus prone to the circumstances of the respective environment and workings of established social norms and power, assimilating them through prefixed and 'normalizing' practices. In both senses then, bodies are both acting and being acted upon.

The need for repetition and for the iteration of norms, which lies at the heart of Butler's account of performativity, does presuppose bodily subjects who, albeit neither intentionally or voluntarily, are able to *do* the repeating. That is to say, there is a presumption of bodies that can repeat and practice movements, develop 'typical' gestures, expressions, habits and skills, all of which become part of their bodily being and a characteristic style of behaviour. Already, performativity has a dual dimension: it is both a preserving and transformative force. The body can preserve past experiences and environmental conditions (or stabilize concrete prevailing social norms) as well as go beyond and change them in the very act of enacting them. The lived and material body is performative in and out of itself, so I want to argue here, because it has the ability to constantly acquire new skills and constitute sensual and motoric meaning and thereby create sensual or practical 'norms' (rule-like structures) itself. Although, bodily performativity in its concrete and situated occurrence is always shaped by historical discourse and intertwined with linguistic performativity, one can descriptively differentiate bodily and linguistic domains of performativity.¹⁰ This will, so I suggest, help to concretely sketch the twofold nature of performativity that Butler is hinting at, as both acting and being acted upon.

3 A phenomenology of habitual identity formation

In what follows, I embark on a bottom-up description of bodily performativity, which I will phenomenologically describe as habit formation. The question I ask concerns the performative development of a *habitual identity formation*. In a first step, I will provide a phenomenology of habit formation and develop the idea of a habitual identity. This is

¹⁰ Moreover, that this practical form of performativity – as a general capacity of human bodily existence – is prior to every linguistic form of performativity or even is the foundation of linguistic forms of performativity. But for such a conclusion, a lot more research is required, where bottom-up and top-down approaches are combined.

to argue that every higher form of personal or narrative forms of identity presupposes the ability to develop a habitual identity; that is, to develop a continuous, typical and recognizable style of perceiving and behaving. Such an operative identity that is habitually lived can be seen as the basis for every thematic form of identification. In a second step, I will re-situate this bottom-up account to show how this helps to concretely describe how specific social norms and circumstances shape respective bodies, and discuss the related possibilities for agency and resistance. It is my contention that, through the formation of bodily habits, norms ‘inform’ lived embodiment. In this sense I argue with Butler that identity formation is indeed performative in a twofold way. I want to go beyond Butler, however, to claim that social norms have an even more direct and permanent impact on bodies than a voluntaristic reading gives credit. Against a deterministic reading, nonetheless, this will go to show how the active bodily contribution in the incorporation of these norms is also the reason for our ability to contest these norms.

3.1 The role of the body for habitual identity

Habit, especially in the phenomenological tradition, is not understood as mechanistic, automatic or routine behavior, that stands in the way of thought, autonomy or agency, but as the very thing that positively frees oneself to engage in higher forms of cognition. Habit formation is thereby characterized as the ability to found and to retain sense, and thus to develop typical and individual ways of relating to the world. On a bodily level it thereby acquires practical meanings and possibly ways of acting to establish a concordant and optimal way of interacting with the respective environment. In this sense, it is possible to anticipate actions of other bodily subjects as they can be said to be in accordance with their general or particular abilities. In turn, individuals constantly transform their abilities or habits, that is, they enrich, strengthen, or weaken them by means of their own actions. (cf. Husserl 1989, 267).

In this sense, habit formation is crucial for every proper form of identity as it structures and orders our engagements with our surroundings in typical ways and thereby establishes a familiarity with our environment. Thereby we do not merely develop types (like, ‘tree’) in ongoing processes of perception (of particular trees). It is within these processes that we develop and remain ourselves a recognizable ‘type’ – like a bodily style of gesturing or walking that can be recognized and even anticipated by others. Habit formation thus provides permanence, coherence and thus identity to the objects we deal with and so, turns the world into an inhabitable place, indeed, a lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*). And the same time, we ourselves acquire a practical potential and individual style through habitual performance. This is what I would like to call a *habitual identity*. In order to describe how such a habitual identity might be formed, beyond (or even developmentally before) the explicit usage of language, I will provide a model of habit formation that distinguishes between different levels of habit that are characterized by their primary or secondary passivity. Such a model, although merely implicitly, can be found in Husserl’s later works.

For Husserl, *already on a passive level*, a general and enduring style of experiencing is generated through repeated individual experiences, namely, by way of recurring perceptual inputs as well as recurring perceptions and movements. This passively generated style of experiencing defines the typical ways in which an individual

perceives specific sensations and experiences. Here, syntheses are already taking place that relate every incoming impression to those experienced earlier, integrating them into 'the past' of the subject. This past, as it is experienced, guides the subject's further perception, prompting a specific style of association and anticipation. One could argue that, already on this level, a passive but nonetheless individual alignment and calibration takes place which serves as the foundation for higher forms of habituality. In line with Husserl then, one could define such a (pre)-formation of habit as a *receptive form of identity* (or constancy), which is characterized by a *primary passivity*. Despite or, better yet, because of its implicit status, this primary passivity constantly influences our present (active) experiences in a subliminal way.

On a *second more active level*, we can identify a *bodily form of habituality*, that is, the bodily acquisition and performance of capacities and skills as well as receptive bodily memory. These form the habitual foundation for every actual activity of the body. Habit, on this level, represents the individual 'I can' or 'I cannot' (depending on the circumstances); these are the abilities of a subject that define its possible actions within a current situation (Husserl 1989, 253ff.). This habitual layer of the body, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, makes it possible for our actual acting body to orient itself within its environment and thereby guarantees it a continuity of movements and experiences (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 84). The workings of the habitual body hence remain mostly anonymous and implicit for the subject as they comprise specific reactions, courses of motions, spatial orientations as well as underlying biological functions and processes. Next to these anonymously operating capacities and abilities, bodily habituality also functions as an implicit memory and know-how of all incorporated experiences (cf. Fuchs 2012). Not only do abilities and patterns of movements become incorporated, but pleasant and painful experiences do too. This bodily memory informs and shapes further experiences in an implicit but influential way.

Bodily habituality can therefore be *generated in a passive or non-explicit way* as in the case of incorporated experiences (e.g. painful experiences or traumas) or of bodily memory. But, this habituality can *also develop from actively and explicitly learning movements* which only after training can be executed in a passive (i.e. operative and implicit) way. In this respect, both aspects of bodily habits point back to a certain kind of bodily activity or 'participation' that is necessary to generate the habit or habitual memory in the first place. Although it is barely possible to reflectively trace back every single movement, feeling or sensation, that was constitutive of the respective habit, this past bodily participation inheres the possibility to re-actualize or even to re-live these situations and movements, thereby making them thematic.

The third and the most active level that can be found explicitly in Husserl's work is what he calls the *personal habituality* (Husserl, 1960, 100ff.). In this sense, habituality pertains to the explicit development or adoption of a belief on a personal, that is, thematic level. In this regard, Husserl defines habituality as a *secondary passivity*. In contrast to the purely passive acquisitions of the subject, the effects and operations of personal habits can – at least in part – be controlled, reflected upon and changed. Indeed, one might decide to give up on a certain outlook, conviction or lifestyle and, as a consequence, they might endeavor to change any related behaviors, habits and attitudes as well.

All levels – primary and secondary passivity, and activity – together compose the individual and personal style of the experiencing subject. The level of bodily habit

formation is core to what I would like to call a *habitual identity*; that is, an identity habitually performed and thus operative, and not yet thematic as such. This goes to show that bodily performativity and its resulting habitual identity operate mostly without thematic awareness of the respective subject. Although one can make aspects of these bodily habits thematic, such as when we learn skills, this might not be the case with all bodily ways of moving or with our styles of perceiving and attending to things in the world (e.g. what catches our attention, which stimuli affect us more than others, etc.). This is why the explicit or voluntaristic strategy of reworking or resisting social norms might be more difficult than presented in Butler's theory. These norms that inform the socialization of how we sit, eat, walk, etc., are embodied, which is to say that they are part of our operative habitual identity, and not merely a matter of how we address ourselves as bodies.

The more passively a habit has been acquired, the more foundational it is thereby to the respective identity as a whole. This also means, however, that it is more difficult to make the habit thematic and so, to try to change it. Genetically, every personal identity thus implies a bodily self-continuity over time, implying a remaining and recognizable bodily 'style' of perception and action, a certain way of handling situations or relating to the world. The unity of an individual, "whom I recognize in an irrecusable evidentness prior to having succeeded in giving the formula of his character, because he conserves the same style in all that he says and in all of his behavior, even if he changes milieu or opinions" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 342, 155, 197). This habitual style is necessary for a coherent stream of experience and it facilitates the orientation and interaction of subjects within a shared environment.

Although habitual identity is a stable and characteristic way of relating to the world that can be identified and anticipated by oneself as well as by others, it cannot be reduced to an already articulated social identity category (like, gender). Rather, habitual identity is gradually developed and so must remain constantly open to a changing environment and to future experiences. Viewed in this way, habitual identity formation is gradual but not (yet) antagonistic or exclusive; that is to say, it does not exclude other possible identities as bodies that 'do not matter'. Habitual identity is instead to be conceived as a dynamic, performative, bodily unity. In this regard, habitual identity can be understood in line with Husserl as a 'type' rather than as a concept (cf. Heinämaa 2011). Types are local, flexible and thus changeable and pre-conceptual generalities whereas concepts are fixed classifications. As a member of a type, individuals retain their differences and individual distinctions, subsumed under a concept they operate as equal (and as mere) instances of a social category or norm (Heinämaa 2011, 143).¹¹

Concretely taken such a habitual identity is always already social. As human bodily subjects we are situated, which is to say that we are embedded in and shaped by already existing ecological, historical, cultural and socio-economic environments, reflecting in turn specific social norms and power relations. With Husserl, we can differentiate between that which is possible for human embodied subjectivities *in general* and that which is *concretely* do-able for a particular subject. *In general*, habitual identity is the

¹¹ Heinämaa argues that sexual difference must not primarily be regarded as a fixed conceptual category but rather as a type. These are two levels of objectivity or generality. Concepts of man or women thereby "do not automatically emerge from our pre-conceptual perceptions of sexed bodies but are established by an active focus of interest and attention" (Heinämaa 2011, 134).

potential of a (human or even non- human) bodily organism to develop a remaining shape, continuous and typical style of experiencing (with and over against an environment). *Concretely*, habitual identity is the “unity of an I can or I cannot” depending on the respective circumstances (Husserl 1989, 286).

From a perspective of situatedness, neither external norms (the social) nor bodies are two entire different entities or realms that must be somehow bridged, but both are agents and results of reciprocal processes of interaction, or, as the late Merleau-Ponty would put it, both are instituting and instituted sense (Merleau-Ponty 2010, 6, 8). If identities were to be purely individual and thus purified of custom, common sense or shared norms, we would be unable to recognise or to understand them as such. Even in the domain of art, there is no such thing as a mere individual sense or invention. The painter must connect his work to the past and “pushes farther the groove already sketched” (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 67). But, were identity to be merely a representation of the respective discourse or a mimicry of the past or a social field, then all persons within such field would be somehow the same. Or, put differently, although they would ‘have an intelligible identity’, they would lack individual appropriation and so, they would not live or be this identity. This is, I believe, also a crucial point in Butler’s theory of gender performativity. However, in my view, she underestimates the fact that one does not merely have an identity, but also habitually *is* an identity. Most people live the gender identity they have been given as though it were self-evident, even though we can come to understand that this is the result of a process of normalization. Only in cases when there is a tension experienced between one’s habitual identity and the demands of the social environment and its norms does the former operative way of living embark on a thematic comparison between one’s body and existing social identity categories.

As humans and persons, we are thus able to relate to this habitual unity and, arguably, have the potential to intentionally appropriate, change or resist those norms and social habits specific to an identity. That we can have an identity in the proper personal sense points to the necessity of identifying with oneself through intersubjective identity categories (*concepts*). Depending on the rigidness of these categories and respective social organization, such processes of identification are not at (or for) all voluntary, smooth or even successful. However this distance and relation to our *operative habitual identity* also shows the possibility of being able to reflectively distance and evaluate oneself. As Husserl points out, although we are embedded in a tradition, we do not shape ourselves and merely inherit, subjects have the personal and ethical responsibility to test and question the norms they passively inherit. It should be admitted, however, that such a view is perhaps overly optimistic, presupposing a high amount of reflectivity and autonomy that is not a given in certain contexts of political domination and restrictions.

But even before we relate to ourselves as bodies with specific (i.e. intersubjectively, socially identifiable) habits or traits (i.e. *proper identity*) explicitly, there is a degree of agency already operating at the bodily level in the formation of the *habitual identity*.

3.2 Habit formation and possibilities of resistance

From a phenomenological perspective, performativity begins at the first stages of bodily norm enactment – the stages which Butler would define as primarily

deterministic. But, in the assimilation of norms, there is already a need for processes of individualization which involves some degree of creativity. Understood as habit formation, performativity (or the process of materialization) cannot be reduced to mere automaticity or to the repetition of custom.

In this sense, even strictly normalizing or forced forms of habituation as discussed by Butler, but also by Foucault and others (cf. Foucault 1995), seem only possible because being a body precisely means that we generate habits and skills from the get-go. Such habit formation is never purely free, individual or neutral, rather, it is always already embedded in a specific material or social situation that frames its limits and possibilities. If I learn how to ski, speed type or dance, for example, I am not completely free to do this however I might like; there are specific bodily, material limits to my performance, but also specific rules and norms as to what counts as skiing, speed typing or dancing. Certainly, these rules are neither universal nor entirely fixed and so can differ in their strictness.

Thus: one could ask: what is the difference between a bodily subject that (1) *freely acquires a habitual style* felt as positive coherence and as individual and a body that is (2) *subjected under prefixed social norms*? Regarding their function, both operations of habituation can be described as the implicit or explicit acquisition of practical and social skills. They might differ, however, with regard to the individual contribution they allow, ranging from an activity of conditioning to an interactive learning process. This might be in turn expressed in either a more *primary* or *secondary passivity*, and result in mere automatic and compulsory behavior on the one hand, and flexible or even intelligent habits on the other.

Taking Foucault's example of discipline in prisons, factories and schools of the eighteenth Century, we see that here every spontaneous interaction with other bodily subjects are prevented through supervision, spatial allocation and purposeful separation. Activities like marching, factory work, and handwriting are learnt according to strict manuals and norms, and have to be executed in an exact predefined way, otherwise the people partaking in these activities were sanctioned (cf. Wehrle 2016). In the case of gender, there are plenty of examples that show how supposedly ideal female or male comportment and behaviors are habituated through familial and public socialization and organization, through unquestioned traditions and rituals. Although non-conformity might not nowadays in western countries be explicitly punished, still there are implicit ways in which they can be reinforced through discursive ideals, the gain of social recognition and of respective social, economic or legal advantages or disadvantages. In these cases, it is surely adequate to speak of a 'forcible iteration of norms' or of 'ritual repetition', as Butler does.

Under less constrained conditions, habit formation is highly dependent on the exploration of one's surrounding space and bodily capacities. Skills are learnt by trial and error and playing around, not by repetition alone. As Merleau-Ponty illustrates with his examples of playing an instrument or typing, to acquire a habit means to acquire a new motoric meaning, that is, a new practical possibility. Such a practical possibility must then not be limited to the very context of its acquirement. The learnt behavior becomes a skill and so, part of the body (namely, the body-schema) of the one who has acquired it. This means in turn that this skill can (at least potentially) be applied to various

contexts. Someone who learnt how to play piano or to type can execute these skills upon every respective object with keys and beyond.

We are thus not faced with uniform picture wherein habit is either forcible iteration or purely creative, but with a spectrum of more or less constrained conditions of habit. This leads to a spectrum of identity formation whereby, on the one side of the spectrum, we have cases of discipline, but on the other side examples like dance improvisation or the development of new music or dance styles; where the first cases rely on strict pre-defined normative manuals and ideals that should be imitated, the second link positively to already established movements, sounds and meanings, creatively cites them, and thereby cultivates new styles and meanings. The latter is what Merleau-Ponty in his later works calls an "institution". Such an institution can thereby not be reduced to the replication of an already instituted sense, like a mimicry of the past, but by carrying this sense into the future by infusing it with a new sense. Like a painter, who pushes "farther the groove already sketched" and thereby "converts a custom into an institution" (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 67).

Even in its highly disciplinary form as pre-defined, fixed norms and power relations, habit nonetheless provides the shaping force of performativity; that is to say, habit brings something into being via its repeated enactments. Habit consists then of a bodily process that is not unlike the semantic performativity of citation, but differs in its concrete realization and impact. While linguistic signs are less dependent on their respective context, bodily performativity, expressed in durable changes of bodily behavior, may be more dependent on it. Gestures, bodily habits or skills are acquired in respective social milieus and then 'belong' or 'stick' to the very bodies that acquired them. Therefore, to 'cut off' the meanings or norms from their respective context, one literally has to move bodily-speaking to another social or cultural context, where these behaviors seem less familiar. But, even then, one carries with them an incorporated past, rendering any transformation slow and gradual. It is therefore not possible to completely 'cut off' incorporated social norms; rather, one must, if possible, explore new environments and engage in doing different things (cf. Dewey 1922, 35) to acquire other (eventually less constraining) habits that then might transform one's overall style to live.¹² A mere intellectual critique or linguistic engagement in re-signification of norms might thus not be enough. Instead, one has to engage in developing altogether different habits as well as different societal organization and circumstances.

On the one hand, habit formation is more permanent and intruding as it affects the very being of the body, that is, how we experience and relate to the world; our *habitual identity*. But the necessity of a bodily appropriation of norms also implies an inherent potential for agency, found in the very process of acquirement as well as in every future actualization in different contexts. Although concrete bodies and their idiosyncratic formation of identities are never pre-discursive or stand outside power-relations, embodied experience has a subversive potential all by itself. The fact that the lived body must take part in the process of identity formation means that we have to attribute at least a certain sense of activity to the body. Even though this normalization defines

¹² The permanence of the incorporation of norms is well illustrated by Pierre Bourdieu's account of *habitus* as embodiment of history or expression of one's social field, cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *A Logic of Praxis* (1990); a slightly more optimistic picture with regard to the 'strategic' transformation of habits is given by John Dewey (1922), he differentiates between mere automatic and intelligent habits.

our bodily compartments, needs and experiences in an anonymous way, the skills that we acquire in this process of discipline are not fully bound to the conditions of its formation. Indeed, we can use them in different contexts. Furthermore, living bodies experience the very processes they are involved in. Even when there is no reflective or articulated insight into these forced forms of habituation, there might still be feelings of disorientation, uncomfortableness and dissatisfaction, which can open room for resistance. As Johanna Oksala puts it, it is not discourses themselves, but the dissatisfaction or gap found within individual experiences in relation to dominant cultural representations that generate critique (Oksala 2016, 45). Re-signification of dominant norms as a strategic resistance in a Butlerian sense is thus only possible because identity is not merely assigned but also experienced, and thus matters to the respective individuals.

4 Conclusion

Although we might be born into a situation not of our choosing and hence affected by norms that precede (and will likely surpass) our existence, we do in our own idiosyncratic way supplant them. Butler's theory of performativity, in this regard, points to the interdependency of freedom and necessity in the enactment of norms (cf. Käll 2015). Repetition, performativity's core characteristic, reflects both its conserving and determining force as well as its point of instability and change.

From a top-down perspective, like Butler's, the temporal hierarchy between these two axes is clear: first, dominant social norms via some symbolic order or discourse affect the body; only then can one begin to enact or re-work these norms. Determinism first, voluntarism later. From a bottom-up or developmental standpoint, however, interested in the pre-conceptual foundations of language and concepts, this order will appear in many respects reversed. Although both assume the basis of identity formation as performative (indeed, there is no essential identity), Butler's account begins with already established identity categories or symbolic orders (i.e. the binary order of heterosexuality) whereas genetic phenomenology considers how some sort of constancy and individuality (typicality) can be established already within pre-conceptual or pre-personal experience.

Contrary to more situated approaches, such a general phenomenological approach seeks to pin down the necessary conditions for every actual and possible experience. In this regard, the body is not thematized as concept with historically contingent meaning invested with power relations, but as the necessary condition for a coherent experience and thus for every formation of identity. Instead of juxtaposing these two strands of approaches, assign them to opposed philosophical schools (poststructuralism vs. phenomenology) or investing in altogether polarizing discussions (e.g. the constructivist vs. essentialist, discourse vs. experience, historical vs. transcendental), these differences are more productively regarded as two complementary approaches to embodiment and to its role in identity formation.

One line of investigation starts *top-down* from a specific historical, social situation with respective norms and identity categories (e.g. gender, race, class, etc.) and investigates how these norms get incorporated and enacted by respective individuals, that is particular bodies. A *bottom-up* approach in turn seeks to tackle how bodily subjects are able to establish a coherent (identical) experience while giving them a

particular style and form in general. In both lines of investigations, bodies, in general and in particular, do matter.

In general, as I tried to argue in this paper, bodies are needed for acquiring a stable identification (with existing norms), but also for the possibility of reshaping them. The habit formation which leads to an individual style or habitual identity, is in turn a building block for every proper, that is, articulated or conceptual, identity.¹³ The shared condition of – however differing – embodiment of humans is thereby the presupposition for the possibility of the experience of a concordant (temporally and spatially ordered) 'world'. But it is also the reason why we (can) share a 'primary vulnerability' that for Butler forms the basis for a 'positive' form of pre-conceptual 'identity', namely a bodily solidarity and practical collectivity (Butler 2015, 63). Such a pre-institutionalized collectivity of assembling bodies relies on shared experiences of precariousness and vulnerability instead of a stable and fixed identification, which in turn excludes other forms of identity. Not every form of identity formation must thus be exclusionary, this seems only happening when the always open and flexible processes of plasticity and performativity are tried to be put into stone. However, such a fixation and preservation of identity might put an end to every meaningful identity formation as this needs identity to be lived and enacted by flexible as well as vulnerable bodies in changing environments.

In particular, embodiment and bodily practices always depend on specific circumstances and thus engenders the practical possibilities and disabilities of subjects. A top-down or concretely situated approach typically consists of an investigation into a specific socio-historical situation as a starting point that reflects identity categories.¹⁴ A good example of such approaches who take bodies serious as lived from within and perceived or interpreted from without, are approaches in critical phenomenology, who integrate poststructuralist and sociological insights (cf. Weiss et al. 2019).

Together, these two approaches follow a weak and strong thesis of identity as bodily performativity. The weak thesis claims that performative bodily practices are needed so as to acquire a stable identification with existing norms, but also to make possible their individualization and transformation. Alternatively, the strong thesis assumes that bodily performativity is necessary for every higher form of identity formation and that it is therefore foundational with regard to conceptual and linguistic forms of signification and identification. In this sense, even though concrete bodies only 'matter' as legal subjects when they can be correctly identified within a normative framework, this identification presupposes the general possibility of (human) bodies to acquire practical skills and habits.

Such *habitual identities*, as I have depicted them, are then in no way merely individual or a creation *ex nihilo*, they are *social* from the start, although not necessarily yet linguistic. They are shaped by interpellation and by the material content and environment which assumes the need to acquire a habitual identity. In this context, the social fields we live in,

¹³ Such a habitual bodily identity relies on the existence of a minimal self as proposed by Dan Zahavi, as formal, implicit self-relation that characterizes all kinds of experiences shall they be experiences of someone, cf. Zahavi 1999, 2017. Moreover, this approach is compatible with a pattern theory of the self, cf. Gallagher 2013, which accounts for different and combinable levels of selves from minimal, bodily to narrative self.

¹⁴ But this must not go along with a dismissal of classical or transcendental phenomenology. Rather, it is precisely because embodiment has a transcendental (necessary) status for every possible experience, that concrete experience can never be neutral: it is situated and shaped by physical, material, political, historical, traditional and generational forces for the better and for the worse.

including their dominant norms and powers, get incorporated by habituation and thus become part of our very bodies. Here, it needs to be differentiated between how these norms *implicitly* affect our bodily comportment (i.e. how we move, gesture, experience and relate to the world) and how we come to *explicitly* refer to ourselves (i.e. perceive, judge and evaluate our bodies). This distinction would function to further differentiate between an account of how norms *operate* and how they are *thematized*. The tensions between these domains could explain how people misidentify with and are thereby motivated to resist the social categories into which they are forced.

Here, it becomes clear that if we want to change social order and dominant norms, it is not enough to change our speaking or thinking, but also our daily doings and habits, which is way more difficult and will only succeed through continuous performances, of not a few but many bodies. But, as bodily subjects with a generally shared vulnerability, there is always the potential for building particular collectivities or serialities (cf. Butler 2015, Sartre 1960, Young 1994). Only such a particular and strategic ‘we-can’ is able to potentially shape the very situation that shaped us, by collectively embodying them differently, and thereby expand the limits of what (normal) embodiment is supposed to mean (Jansen and Wehrle 2015). Only, a concretely visible plurality of bodies is able to gradually achieve what in general should be self-evident, namely that all bodies, independent of their cultural intelligibility, abilities or disabilities, can and should matter.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2014). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Allen, A. (1999). *The power of feminist theory. Domination, resistance, solidarity*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Allen, A. (2013). *The politics of our selves. Power, autonomy, and gender in contemporary critical theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Al Saji, A. (2010a). Bodies and sensings: On the use of Husserlian Phenomenology for feminist theory. *Continental Philosophy Review*, 43, 13–37.
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *Doing things with words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Beauvoir, De S. (2011). *The second sex*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Benhabib, S. (1995). Feminism and postmodernism: An uneasy alliance. In S. Benhabib, J. Butler, D. Cornell, N. Fraser (Eds.). *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, by L. Nicholson (pp. 1–16). New York: Routledge.
- Bordo, S. (1993). Postmodern subjects, postmodern bodies, postmodern resistance. In S. Bordo. *Unbearable Weight*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 277–300.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *A Logic of Praxis*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Butler, J. (1986). Sex and gender in simone de beauvoir's second sex. In *Yale French Studies*, 72, 35–49.
- Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *In Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519–531.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble. Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York/London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter. On the discursive limits of 'Sex'*. New York/London: Routledge.

- Butler, J. (1997a). *The Psychic life of power. Theories in subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Butler, J. (1997b). *Excitable speech. A politics of the performative*. New York/London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2015). *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly*. Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1988). Signature event context. In J. Derrida. *Limited Inc*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1922). *Human nature and conduct. An introduction to social psychology*. New York: Henry Holt & Company.
- Ewara. (2020). Judith Butler's reading of the historico-racial schema. In *Critical Philosophy of Race*, 8(1–2), 265–291.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish. The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Fuchs, T. (2012). The phenomenology of body memory. In S. C. Koch, T. Fuchs, & M. Summa (Eds.), *Body memory, metaphor and movement* (pp. 9–23). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Gallagher, S. (2005a). *How the body shapes the mind*. New York: Clarendon.
- Gallagher, S. (2005b). Dynamic models of body schematic processes. In H. De Preester & V. Knockaert (Eds.), *Body image and body schema* (pp. 233–250). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishers.
- Gallagher, S. (2013). A pattern theory of the Self. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2013.00443>.
- Heinämaa, S. (2011). A phenomenology of sexual difference: Types, styles and persons. In C. Witt (Ed.), *Feminist metaphysics. Explorations in the ontology of sex, gender and the self* (pp. 131–155). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- Husserl, E. (1960). *Cartesian meditations. An introduction to phenomenology*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Husserl, E. (1989). *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and phenomenological philosophy. Second book: Studies in the phenomenology of constitution*. In Edmund Husserl. *Collected works, volume 3*. The Hague: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Jansen, J., Wehrle, M. (2018). The normal body. Female bodies in changing contexts of normalization and optimization. In C. Fischer, L. Dolezal (Eds.), *New Feminist Perspectives on Embodiment*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 37–55.
- Käll, L. (2015). A path between voluntarism and determinism. Tracing elements of phenomenology in Judith Butler's account of performativity. In *lambda nordica* 2–3, 23–48.
- Lacan, J. (1978). *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis*. New York: Norton.
- Lacan, J. (1985). *The seminar of Jacques Lacan*. New York: Norton.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968). *The visible and the invisible*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1973). *The prose of the world*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2010). *Institution and passivity. Course notes from the Collège de France (1954–1955)*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012). *Phenomenology of perception*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Oksala, J. (2016). *Feminist experiences. Foucauldian and phenomenological investigations*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Plessner, H. (2019). *Levels of the organic and the human*. An introduction to philosophical anthropology: Fordham University Press.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1960). *Critique of dialectical reason: Volume 1*. Paris: Editions Gallimard.
- Walsh, P. J. (2020). Intercorporeity and the first-person plural in Merleau-Ponty. In *Continental Philosophy Review*, 53, 21–47.
- Wehrle, M. (2016). Normative embodiment. The role of the body in Foucault's Genealogy. A phenomenological re-reading. In *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 47(1), 56–72.
- Wehrle, M. (2020). Bodily performativity. Enacting norms. In: Rentsch, T. & Guidi, L. (Eds.), *Phenomenology as Performative Exercise*. Brill: Leiden, 120–139.
- Weiss, G. (1999). *Perspectives on embodiment: The intersections of nature and culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Weiss, G. (2015). The Normal, the Natural, and the Normative: A Merleau-Pontian Legacy to Feminist theory, Critical Race Theory, and Disability studies. In *Continental Philosophy Review* 48 (1):77–93.
- Weiss, G., Murphy, A., Salamon, G. (2019). (Eds.). *50 concepts for a critical phenomenology*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Young, I. M. (1994). Gender as seriality: Thinking about women as a social collective. In *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 19/3, 713–738.
- Young, I. M. (2005). *On female body experience: "Throwing like a girl" and other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Zahavi, D. (1999). *Self-awareness and alterity: A phenomenological investigation*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Zahavi, D. (2017). Thin, thinner, thinnest: Defining the minimal self. In C. Durt, T. Fuchs, C. Tewes (Eds.), *Embodiment, Enaction, and Culture. Investigating the Constitution of the Shared World*, <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262035552.003.0010>

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.