



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

Domesticating Instability and Learning New Body Care: An Ethnographic Analysis of Cleanness Practices on the Threshold of Adolescence (France and Italy)

*Nicoletta Diasio**

Author information

* Institut Universitaire de France, University of Strasbourg, France.

Contact author's email address

* nicoletta.diasio@misha.fr

Article first published online

October 2017

HOW TO CITE

Diasio, N. (2017). Domesticating Instability and Learning New Body Care: An Ethnographic Analysis of Cleanness Practices on the Threshold of Adolescence (France and Italy). *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 9(3), 122-155. doi: 10.14658/pupj-ijse-2017-3-6



PADOVA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Domesticating Instability and Learning New Body Care: An Ethnographic Analysis of Cleanness Practices on the Threshold of Adolescence (France and Italy)

Nicoletta Diasio *

Abstract: Situations of instability and uncertainty such as age changes and changes in the body constitute privileged moments to analyze informal learning in daily life (Brougère, 2009). Starting from an ethnography carried out in France and Italy, we show how children appropriate “new” techniques of the body through verbal incitation, mimetic processes, and through the circulation of objects, sensory absorption, and moral and social judgments. These learning processes allow for the acquisition of “confident” and socially correct gestures in times when the body changes and partly becomes a stranger to itself, which imposes both a critical distance and the acquisition of new habits. These procedures are deployed through three modes: intensification of existing practices, adjustment of these practices, and a search for the right measure. However, acquiring such know-how requires a capacity to manage a variety of demands, and skill in orchestrating them and appropriating them. Blunders, failures and badly or barely successful attempts are of central importance for this type of learning, and constitute a fundamental dimension of the process of subjectivation.

Keywords: techniques of the body, children, age transition, subjectivation

* Institut Universitaire de France, University of Strasbourg, France. E-mail: nicoletta.diasio@misha.fr

Introduction

At breakfast times I would establish (and still establish) a more or less stable relationship with my body, and my chair, the bowl and the table. I would once again be the organizing center. I would bring calm to the muddled play of the elements and everything else would begin to exist with the same clarity, including the other chairs, the wall facing me, the entire room, the rest of the apartment and that which we call, somewhat uncomfortably, space or the universe. The game was never a guaranteed success. Just knocking over a bowl would be enough to upset it. My hand would become shameful, and doubt itself; the liquid flittingly splattering rivulets across the table, and the world would take on a spongy appearance (Sansot, 2003, p. 27)

Daily life seems permeated with stability and familiarity: repetition, obviousness, routines and habits are supposed to delineate behaviors and control unforeseen and disturbing events. At the same time nothing changes as much as daily life, which is scattered with small things that upset the normal course of events (missing the bus, catching a cold, missing an appointment, spoiling a meal, ...), and pervaded with new practices, fresh relationships between people, or new objects and ways of doing things, which all change with time. As a day-to-day labor, daily life is constructed through an alternation of habitual gestures and small or great disturbances: “the texture of social life is constantly submitted to snags that entail its reweaving.” The tension between the destruction and the reproduction of daily life is without a doubt a source of learning” (Brougère, 2009, p. 30). This informal type of learning is embedded in daily life and thrives on novelty, uncertainty, and even mistakes, is at the heart of the present contribution. We will focus on cleanness and body care at the end of childhood, at the moment when children’s relationship with their bodies and ordinary body care are being reformulated. Do the physical transformations happening between the ages of 9 and 13 change children’s perception of what is dirty and what is clean? And how do children learn to take care of this “new” body in the course of their daily lives?

The data presented here were gathered as part of the research project on the experiences of the body and age transitions among 9 to 13-year olds in France and Italy (see methodology below). A part of that work focussed on the experiences of children and their entourage through an ethnography of discourses and body techniques in the family environment, and among

peers, outside of the school environment. Our work gave central importance to the children's point of view, considering them both as social agents and as producers of culture (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Sirota, 2006), and also looked at the competences children apply to govern their bodies.

This means that we worked on a micro-social scale, focusing foremost on interactions between the social actors, on observations of body techniques and on the appropriation of objects, like those toiletry products on which the pubescent body relies. This focus on the "small" and on interactions are characteristics of a sociology of daily life described by Georges Balandier: "A localization, a dimension [. . .] which allow for direct and/or participatory observation due to the actual scale of the phenomenon; a presence of the social actors who can be identified through their representations, their strategies and their practices – therefore, an immediate understanding of the subject in action and in situation, a grasp of the social in movement; a collection of facts that express *a whole experience*, in the sense that the actors are normally observable in the majority of their practices, ranging from the most individualized practices to those that are most constrained by the impositions of the great social frameworks. [. . .] This means choosing a side: that of the social actors, their representations and symbolizations, their practices, and their means to *negotiate* their relationship both with the structures and with the event" (Balandier, 1983, p. 10). On this scale a lot of information about each child and its family is gathered, but the correlations with the great social determiners such as socio-professional category or generational effect become less visible and cannot be generalized¹.

Zooming in on the small gestures of daily life also constitutes a field of inquiry because, when it comes to the body and all those things that are "self-evident" parts of life are concerned, "movements contradicts words

¹ On this point, we follow what Dominique Desjeux (2004) proposes about scales of observation. One of the first actions in research indeed consists in dividing reality in separate segments, and things which may emerge at a given scale (for instance when the macro-social scale reveals factors that determine class or population) may disappear at another scale. Depending, then, on the research approach and methodology, this "realist-relativist" position will lead to different observations of different social realities, which will have to be studied with different conceptual frameworks and different systems of interpretation.

which contradict speech” (Kaufmann, 1992). We wanted to look at, and put words on the unremarkable obvious facts which shape everyday life, because we are convinced that they constitute resources for subjects to affirm themselves as, to put in in Sansot’s words, “the organizing center of their own world”.

Finally, our fieldwork raises questions about the idea of incorporation as a passive and linear interiorization of cultural and social patterns (Bourdieu, 1980)², since it highlights the multiplicity of mediations which allow children to appropriate new know-how, while it also sheds light on the tensions that arise from this. “By centering on the play of structures [the concept of *habitus*] ignores the concrete movements of the body, the small and falsely banal gestures, the habit recognized as such by common sense” (Kaufmann, 1997, p. 195). To incorporate a new pattern of action, to acquire new habits, and to defy the gravity of one’s body does not go without self-work and a critical distance from the subjects. Between the material faithfulness of acquired gestures and a certain amount of plasticity in change “the habit has to remain (more or less) open to thought” (Kaufmann, 1997, p. 196). This “more or less,” which is slipped in between parentheses, invites us to look at learning, at the difficulty of learning, and at what learning involves in terms of transformation of the self and of the world.

Methodology

In this article, we present the findings of a part of the research project CorAge, “Experiences of the body and age transitions among 9 to 13-year olds (France and Italy),” which focuses on the ethnography of the changing body and on domestic practices³.

² In his attempt to denaturalize the body, Bourdieu describes the habits of the body that belong to certain social groups: he borrows Mauss’ concept of *habitus* to show the extent to which the social is imprinted on the body, and how the body can be taken as an X-ray of a social class, or of fractions within a social class. For an analysis of how Bourdieu carries out this denaturalization of the body, see Memmi 2009.

³ This research project was carried out by the Laboratoire Cultures et Sociétés en Europe (CNRS-University of Strasbourg), the Laboratoire Lorrain des Sciences Sociales (University of Lorraine) in cooperation with the Ca’ Foscari University in Venice, and funded by the

The study looked at 69 interviewees aged between 9 and 13 and living in the Alsace and Lorraine regions in France, and in the Venice region in Italy. Individual interviews were held between 2010 and 2013 with the children and with their parents, and in the case of siblings or other significant caretakers such as grandmothers, cousins or godmothers, these persons were also included. In our search for ways in which children's categories are produced, we set up an ethnography that allowed us to follow these young interlocutors step by step, at home and outside of the environments of both home and school, in spaces such as the street, a public garden, a village square or the area in front of the school entrance. Moreover, in order to be able to respect our interlocutors' intimacy which discussions of body changes imply, we gave central place to the analysis of objects (toys, clothes, shoes, accessories, body care products, dental braces, glasses), their usage and the way they circulate. Paying more attention to the interlocutors' activities rather than to their representations thus allowed us to collect an amount of highly dense material which sheds light on the micro-actions that are repeated daily (doing one's hair, getting dressed, taking care of one's body), or that become events. The interviews were repeated several times in order to build trust and to elaborate and dig deeper into the information provided. During the first meeting, the child would give a guided tour of his/her living environment, which allowed us to gently enter into the domestic area, while at the same time giving an active role to the child who becomes mediator and instructor, and who decides what is "showable" and what is not. We extended this initial empirical work through a follow-up that focused on 5 families whom we continued to meet for another 2 to 3 years, in each of the regions. Finally, we spent a year restituting our work to the children, the professionals and the parents involved, which in turn generated more information as well as reflexivity on the collected materials.

As for the group, the initial project covered children between the ages of 9 and 13. However, during our fieldwork we also interviewed a few

French National Research Agency (program Enfants-Enfance / Children and Childhood). The ethnography has been carried out by Alessandra Borin, Chloé Buchmann, Céline Combettes, Donatella Cozzi, Elsa D'Amato, Benoît Dejaiffe, Nicoletta Diasio, Marta Duthika Scarpa Marie-Pierre Julien, Louis Mathiot, Pauline Michel, Estelle Reinert, Niloofar Shariat, Simona Tersigni, Virginie Vinel. We thank them all for their contribution to the project.

children who were 14, because we realized that from that age onwards, children are more strongly aware of body changes and at the same time adopt a more reflexive and distanced stance towards them. We made sure to diversify the population, both in terms of geographical area as in terms of the parents' professional occupations. Half of the interviewed children and families live in urban and suburban areas, one third lives in small cities and one tenth lives in rural areas, with a higher proportion of these in the French regions.

The mothers equally represent socio-professional statuses of across the board, with a larger share of them being salaried workers (20/69), while the shares are divided among executive and managements positions and intermediary or working class positions. A minority represent the categories of small business owners (2/69) and housemakers (1/10). The fathers equally represent intermediary professions or salaried workers (14/69), and are also small business owners (2/69) or workers (10/69)⁴. A few fathers are in management positions or occupy highly intellectual positions. The population we interviewed thus reflects the diversity of the areas we observed: the three regions contain large conurbations and are situated close to the borders of their countries, and the Lorraine and Venice regions are also post-industrial regions. At the same time, we insisted on working in the rural areas that are also a characteristic of these geographical zones.

Between eruption and control: a renewed concern for cleanness

The body is a privileged observatory to study the snags of daily life and the way they generate learning. Because if "the living being is first and foremost a crossroads" (Bergson, 1986, p. 129), the body, in its biological materiality, is in constant mutation, an undefined object that has to be made to conform on a daily basis: to contain humors and odors, to regulate incorporations and ex-corporations, to brush one's teeth and control one's breath, to wash, to be "presentable," to comb, to change underwear and to dress according to social codes linked to rank, gender, social class, all the

⁴ With a more important proportion of these in Venice, because of the socio-economic configuration of this region.

while maintaining one's singularity and affirming one's individuality, which has become a form of social *doxa*. The "body fortress" described by Bauman (1995) is therefore also a matrix of uncertainty that requires surveillance and regulation through knowledge and practice.

The end of childhood and the transition into adolescence constitute moments of deep uncertainty about oneself and one's body. Children's lives are marked by relations that contradict their growing experience: on the one hand, they relate to a way of thinking about development which defines the "normality" of growth in strongly normative terms, by adopting and applying supposedly universal stages and thresholds, and on the other hand there is great diversity both in their individual experiences and in the physiological, institutional (e.g. school levels), social and family references that are applied to mark the ages and stages of their development. This indecision is also linked to the plethora of physical signs of growth, such as changes in size and body odor, the slimming of the face, the arrival of pimples and body-hair, breasts, menstruation, pubic hair, facial hair, voice changing and a whole range of other small individual manifestations: hair growth in one's ears, the ability to swim more laps at the pool, or the asymmetrical growth of one's breasts or one's nostrils. The young people with whom we spoke are caught between the force of these physical changes and the need to control this physical instability. Their bodies seem to have suddenly become much more visible, and loud, and smelly, and big. A few prickly hairs lost in a beard that still mostly consists of soft down, hips that widen and become round, imposing another change in trouser size, new smells coming from the feet which seem to be growing suddenly and disproportionately large compared to the rest of the body.

These potential eruptions seem to be accompanied by strong injunctions to keep in check and control what goes through the body's orifices and borders: bathroom time changes and follows a stricter separation between sexes, ages and generations (Diasio & Vinel, 2015); children more often express the need to spend time in there by themselves (Diasio & Vinel, 2015); a new type of shame appears to hover over family relations, and nudity becomes gradually excluded, especially with parents of the other gender (Vinel, 2017); reminders issued by adults (parents, teachers or other guardians) of the need for more body hygiene become increasingly pressing, and a stronger interest in one's physical appearance seems to emerge, almost unexpectedly, as we can see in the following dialogue:

Greta: Sometimes I say: “Mom, do I really have to take a shower?”

Interviewer: Why? Because you’re tired? You don’t feel like it?

Greta: I never feel like taking a shower, whereas Anna [her friend who is the same age] I don’t know what is up with here these days, but she always wants to take showers.

Interviewer: Ah! Then I have to meet her! I have to interview her! And so it makes you suspicious, this interest in showers?

Greta: Yes because she too, not so long ago, she would say: “Mom, do I really have to take a shower?” and now she’s saying: “You’re not taking a shower tonight? Why?” (Greta, 10 years old, middle-sized city in Venice region)⁵.

The desire to take showers here seems to mark a passage: it is no longer a question of “just doing it” under the orders of an adult, but it’s a question of spontaneously adhering to the order by appropriating it and making it a self-applied norm. This process is therefore in no way individual, as Mary Douglas already demonstrated a long time ago (1966). In her groundbreaking work, practices of hygiene and body care constitute the framework of a fluid and uncertain existence. By performing ordinary gestures that separate the clean from the dirty, by tidying and cleaning and thus recomposing the ephemeral stability of existence, which is constantly threatened by disorder and change, we confirm a hierarchy of social order, and distribute statuses and positions. All societies thus have their people in the margin – i.e. actors placed in the margin of the social structure who, in turn, have been women, untouchables, hippies, vagabonds, migrants, Roma, etc. – and to whom a number of ex-centric behaviors that are deemed “dirty” or “contaminating” are assigned. “Being clean” is thus fashioned as a work of incorporation of ways of thinking, of categorizing reality, and of conforming to the rules of a given society.⁶ Just like danger and threats to the social order emanate from the margins, the limits of the body are analogically subjected to vigilance and to the incessant need for conformity: orifices, humors, excretions, but also hair, teeth, and nails, are objects of precautions that vary from one society to the next. Growing up

⁵ Father is employed and has university-level degree, mother homemaker.

⁶ Other anthropologists, sociologists and historians have discussed the relative, context-bound and historical nature of what is transmitted to children as being clean or dirty (Bateson and Mead 1942, Benedict 1946, Whiting and Child 1953, Whiting 1963).

means interiorizing this discipline of the marginal, as Greta's half-surprised and half-suspicious discourse about her girlfriend Anna seems to indicate. And, at the same time, as Douglas reminds us, such policing is never total, since it needs to leave open the possibility of change and renewal.

The passage from childhood into adolescence then constitutes an interesting tool to analyze the tension between order and disorder, between oneself and the world. As all periods of transition, it arouses anxiety and a need to govern the uncertainties generated by the new. The erupting and differently visible body generates, in the societies studied here, more sustained surveillance, but also causes other forms of creativity. Being clean thus happens both as a form of interiorization of a body discipline (Elias, 1939; Ariès, 1987; Corbin, 1982) and as "the constitution (...) of a physical sphere that belongs, properly speaking, to the subject" (Vigarello, 1985, p. 247). At the end of childhood, body hygiene thus generates a complex set of learning: it involves both cleanness and appearance in its aim of shaping a body that conforms to what is expected through norms linked to age, gender, and class. This construction of the self through body hygiene constitutes a collective process where several actors with varying expectations intervene, and it is a learning that has to reckon with a body that changes rapidly, and with an equally fast succession of passages from one status to the next (for instance the double transition from elementary school to middle school to high school), and this brings on a constant risk of awkwardness.

The family: a community of practices

Gilles Brougère, in his theory on the learning experiences of everyday life, recalls how strongly these are characterized by their invisibility and by the way they are embedded in the activities themselves. He concludes that learning is inseparable from practice, which makes the concept of participation a central part of his thinking: "Indeed, daily life is an interweaving of participation. Whether we look at household tasks which consist in carrying out together, albeit on very unequal terms depending on the members of the family, the household tasks of production and reproduction, within the family community (cleaning, cooking, but also collective leisure activities or conversations, and even simply the fact of living together), or whether we look at professional tasks that entail varying

ways of organizing and of collaborating depending on the profession or the company [. . .] In both cases, daily practices imply participation in different groups” (Brougère, 2009b, p. 268).

The idea that learning, and, therefore, participating, is “doing with,” engaging in a shared activity, is inspired by theories of situated learning developed by authors like Etienne Wenger or Jean Lave. They start out from studies in a variety of fields (ranging from tailors in Liberia over midwives in South America to Alcoholics Anonymous in the United States), Lave and Wenger (1991) show that, independently from the object of learning, learning activities also share the process of participation in social groups, in groups which they call “communities of practice,” as a common characteristic. Participation can be more or less peripheral, and can imply varying degrees of involvement. Still, in spite of its controversial character, the concept of participation allows us to define “the collection of people who, through their connectedness, manage to develop, in a specific field, a practice, or in other words, a series of “ways of doing things,” both formal and informal, implicit and explicit knowledge, which allow them to accomplish what they want to accomplish [. . .]” (E. Wenger, interview with V. Berry, 2008, p. 180). Any community of practice therefore implies sustained mutual relations, a language, shared histories, a shared undertaking and a common repertoire of tools, gestures, codes and routines, which themselves become elements of the practice and maintain a feeling of belonging. For the children we met, family constitutes one of those communities of practice, and the household is a privileged space for the domestication of their adolescent bodies.

Body hygiene is not a consensual activity between the ages of 9 and 13, and many children see it as a tedious process, which they try to get out of, like Barbara (9 years old, Lorraine region) who justifies her reluctance to wash, “just brushing my teeth at noon and at night.” And even if the increased attention to the self and to one’s appearance (clothes, accessories, hairdos, perfumes) is the shared lot of children that age, the question of body hygiene can be a subject for family disputes and discussions, particularly with mothers and older sisters. This is how Emma discusses her daughter Rosella, who is 13:⁷

⁷ Father self-employed, mother homemaker.

There certainly are changes! She has started to put on make-up, perfume, deodorant, she washes a bit less often, not always [. . .] and not with the same care as she gives to her make-up, her clothes or her hair. She has not caught on that she is beginning to smell!

Interviewer: She doesn't notice the smell?

E.: Well, since it's been repeated so often, now she has ... When the odours began to be noticeable, she didn't realise it, so we had to say: "My darling, you are deodorizing the room" ... Now she notices a bit more, let's say she does not pay as much attention to hygiene as to her clothes, she can spend ten minutes choosing a scarf and she goes out without brushing her teeth, and then, sometimes, I get very angry." (Emma, 47 years old, middle-sized city in the Venice region).

Or then there is Lisa⁸, who talks about the active role her older sister plays in her daily practices:

Lisa: "She's the one who comes after she's finished her shower and says: "Lisa take a shower!" [...] "I don't feel like taking a shower." "Go take a shower!" But I go anyway.

Interviewer: OK. So you listen to your sister?

L: At the same time, I don't really have the choice.

Interviewer: Oh, really?

L: Otherwise afterwards there's sanctions, punishments.

Interviewer: From your sister?

L: Well afterwards she'll tell mom, "Mom she's doing this, Mom she's doing that." Or sometimes she's the one who punishes me. Because...I don't know, but usually I obey quite fast, hey. She's like "Liiiiiiiiisssssssssaaaaaaa take a shower!" And I don't challenge her any further (Lisa, 10 years old, middle-sized city in the Lorraine region).

This initiation in the new demands of cleanness, mostly highlighted by the mothers, proceeds through various modalities whose efficiency lies in the way they are combined. Barbara Rogoff (2001 and 2007) has proposed the concept of guided participation to show how adults guide children in taking charge of their daily lives. For instance, through gestures or through spoken advice, the action is guided in a way that allows it to be what it should be in accordance with a given social situation. In our fieldwork, we uncovered four main modalities that allow for the incorporation of new

⁸ Lisa lives with her mother who is a secretary and sometimes with her half-sister.

know-how, where the materiality of the body, the senses and the objects meet language practices and reflexive mimesis.

Saying it and saying it again

“Knowing how, learning how, and telling how to do: the coherence of the chain of gestures and the dexterity of the hands in turn, need to be put into words” (Giard, 1994, p. 302). The first type of modality that we’ve encountered is definitely verbal incitation: as we can see from the two preceding accounts, saying it and saying it again constitute an expression of adult vigilance and a way of drawing the child’s attention to the new demands of body care. Such language practices are also citational practices in Judith Butler’s sense (2004): namely, they are discursive practices which establish “identities” as being “natural” and “normal” through repetition. In this way, gender identifications are the product of constant citation practices: they become valid through repetition. We also find these signs of age and gender in the incitements concerning washing one’s body. There is often a new practice to be adopted – washing one’s armpits, putting on deodorant, going to the bidet more often (only in Italy) – in order to behave like a “little man” or a “little woman”. However, what is interesting is how these discourses, by being repeated, produce recognition and experience of the self. In this way Anna, the girl who is described by her girlfriend Greta as having suddenly become a partisan of showering, is the object of verbal insistence from her mother Stefania, until she becomes, as her mother puts it, “bravina,” i.e. “quite good”⁹:

I had to insist a lot: “wash yourself, wash yourself, wash yourself!” or “but why do I need to wash, I’m going to sweat afterwards anyway,” “well then stay dirty.” Or when she’d leave the house with dirty hair, how I bothered her! Now it’s the other way round [...] while Greta stayed in her dirty phase, it’s hard to make her wash, Anna had a scoop, it’s the complete opposite. It’s been stable for a month now, she washes without a problem. She’s the one who tells me, but she had a month when she was going

⁹ Stefania is an accountant who lives alone with her daughter, Anna, in a small city in the Venice region.

overboard “I have to wash, I have to wash!” (Stefania, 40 years old, mother of Anna, 10, middle-sized city in Venice region).

Such verbal encouragement is not limited to the home environment and to the nuclear family: Romane, Pierre, Elisa, Chloé, Lisa and other children recall during the interview that their grandmothers, aunts, godmothers and godfathers, uncles and cousins male and female, all share these discursive practices, as Stefania so picturesquely puts it in her dialect when talking about her daughter Anna: “Maybe a few commentaries while talking with my sister, like “she does not want to wash,” and my sister like “Ah! Careful she stinks!” This way of verbalizing the body is therefore always situated in specific social relations that are quite often defined by a strongly marked generational order.

Jokes are one of the ways in which these verbal encouragements are conveyed. As in so-called traditional societies where jokes constitute a way of touching on sensitive issues or solving tensions, especially among family members, humor is often used to signal changes in adolescents’ bodies (e.g. breast growth or the appearance of down). It’s a register that allows people to discuss things that are embarrassing or difficult to talk about, as it opens the possibility to play on the fragile border between consent and prohibition and to take back what one has said when the statement is felt to be shocking or offensive. It thus allows people to maintain the bond while at the same time signaling disagreement.

As Ingrid Voléry’s work among teachers and educators also shows “(humor) can help speakers uncover which part of a practice or statement constitutes an infraction of the norms on decency or politeness. But humor can also allow people to get past the problem (by de-dramatizing the error or the infraction)” (Voléry, 2017, p. 41). Humor also informs us about the types of subjects that a society is likely to promote, namely individuals who know how to put some distance between themselves and their practices and who know how to “control their emotions, resist the temptation to disqualify and [...] maintain a certain form of distance from their selves” (Voléry, 2017, p. 42). Jokes thus offer resources for self-derision and help to alleviate delicate situations. However, humor is also tied in with relationships of power, and highlights inequality of status (Ferroni, 1983): at times liberating and at other times stigmatizing, humor is not always symmetrically distributed (children cannot always mock the adults about their hygiene), and the borders between who teases and who is being teased

are not always reversible. Children are well aware of this: they notice how thin the line between humor and embarrassment can be, and the jokes made by their elders can sometimes feel quite heavy.

Looking and imitating

Learning about oneself and others also happens by looking. In a conversation with the enquirer, the parents of Carlotta, 10 years old¹⁰, say that “they are teaching her to sometimes put some gloss on, in the morning (“that’s enough” says the father), not all by herself in her room, but when she’s in the bathroom waiting for her mother to put some on, and she’ll apply a tiny bit of it to her own lips (“almost nothing,” the mother adds)” (small city in the Venice region, ethnographic notes, October 2011 in Marta Duthika Scarpa, 2012, p. 71). In the same way, the practice of shaving is not often transmitted in any formal way, and many boys say they “know” because they’ve seen their father shave. These silences, which are shaped by observation, particularly occur among the young male interviewees, who all declare having few verbal exchanges about their bodies, both within the family and outside of the home. The silence surrounding boys’ physical transformations, and the practices that allow them to control these, constitutes one of the striking findings of this research project (Diasio, 2017). Sometimes looking can also help to circumvent prohibitions, as Marta tells us: “I love pencil eyeliner, but I don’t know how to apply it, I’m not very good at it. I should ask my mother, but I know she doesn’t want me to wear any, so sometimes I try to do it by myself [...] or I look at her when she does it” (Marta, 12 years old, middle-sized city in the Venice region). These mimetic processes therefore constitute a way of incorporating the right gestures through identification with the other and objectivation of the self. The body becomes a workbench where, through interiorization of the actions of the other, subjects measure, evaluate and interiorize what they can do themselves. “The action of the gesture is decomposed in an organized series of elementary actions which are coordinated in sequences of variable length, depending on the desired effect, and structured on a model that is learned from others through

¹⁰ Father business owner and mother self-employed, a small city in the Venice region.

imitation (someone showed me how to do), reconstituted from memory (I saw it done this way) or established through trial and error based on similar actions (I found out how to do it).

The skill in adapting gestures to the conditions in which they are applied and the quality of the obtained result, constitute the challenge of putting into practice and revealing a precise know-how” (Giard, 1994, p. 285). While imitation has long been considered a passive form of more or less homogenizing practices, we believe that the word mimesis more aptly describes the subject’s active involvement: “during mimetic processes, people strive to resemble the world. Mimesis allows people to go to the exterior, an exterior which they incorporate in their interior world, and then they can express their interior world.” (Gebauer & Wulf, 2005, p. 13). This asymmetrical observation, the to and fro between the self and the other, constitute moments of reflexivity and self-construction.

Mimesis is also very common among siblings. Erwan (12 years old, middle-sized city in Alsace region) compares the methods of hair removal of the girls in his class with those of his sister. But this exchange of observation becomes more modest when adolescence arrives: with age come new demands concerning intimacy, often respected by parents who grant their children the right to have their own bodies, and this is not only the case in the middle and upper classes, who supposedly favor the emergence of the child-individual (Tillard, 2014). Bodies and looks thus brush up against one another in a game of avoiding what is shown, veiled or hidden, and this turns body care and hygiene into an occasion to participate in ways of doing things and into a moment of solitary experimentation. It is because of this ambiguity that material culture is a central dimension in the process of acquiring incorporated know-how. Through the shared use of products (shampoo, shower gel, hair gel, body lotions or face creams, deodorants) exchanges happen concerning the techniques with which they are used and applied. The body thus becomes a place of domestic intimacy, though it is an intimacy that is distorted by the mute and reassuring presence of the world of objects.

Exchanging objects and techniques of usage

Physical transformations cannot be dissociated from practices of *anthropopoiesis* (Remotti, 2003) that include the material culture: soaps

and shower gels, deodorant, waxing, creams, and, beyond these, dental braces, glasses, clothes, jewelry, shoes, accessories... This materiality constructs bodies and concretizes physical transformations whose fluidity and vagueness can cause deep uncertainty. Objects travel within the household, and thus transmit techniques of the body (Mauss, 1934)¹¹ that are learned and transmitted during the exchanges of daily life.

Working on how objects travel and the itineraries they follow allows us to reconstruct identifications that are elaborated at the crossroads of the three dimensions of gender, age, and generation. In this way, different types of gels (more or less sculpting, colored or not) travel between fathers and sons, or stepfathers and stepsons. Perfumes are often offered from one woman of a line to another, and grandmothers or another member of the mother's parental line often play a central part in this, especially at the time of the first purchase. For boys, access to the first perfume rather happens during exchanges or borrowings from family members of the male line, especially fathers, as Eiskonnen (14) or Michel (12)¹² confirm. Deodorants are more personalized and more easily become habitual purchases, and mothers play a central role in their supply network, whether the purchase is for girls or boys. Generally speaking the female family members seem more active in purchasing and lending hygiene and body products, and there is a transversal transmission going from the female members to the boys (with grandmothers occupying a central space) while, inversely, transmission from the fathers, brothers or male cousins to the female members of the family is much less frequent. This echoes the fact that generally the male members of the family are less actively inclined to incite children to body hygiene, as we have already described in the preceding sections.

These products, which travel by transmission among female or male

¹¹ Marcel Mauss defines as "techniques of the body: the ways in which people in every society know, in a traditional way, how to use their bodies" (Mauss, 1993, p. 365). These habits "mainly vary among societies, education systems, customs and modes. They should be seen as techniques and as the workings of a collective and individual practical reasoning, where ordinarily we only see the soul and its capacity for repetition" (Mauss, 1993, p. 369).

¹² This does not exclude a certain experimental flexibility, put forward, for instance, by Choupy, 13 years old, who collects perfume samples for men through his father, or the case of Simon, 13 years old who enjoys trying out his mother's perfume (both live in a middle-sized city in the Lorraine region).

family members, also give rise to the learning of gender-specific body techniques: like the 11-year-old boy who, in a collective interview in Lorraine, told us that he puts on perfume not so much for the pleasure procured by the scent, as for a desire to perform the gesture – and he taps his cheeks one after the other – which he sees his father make after having shaven. On the female side, female techniques and transmissions are also connected to the place in the family structure, as we can see from Sophie’s account of her waxing experiences, and the way she maps out the zones of her body:

For my eyebrows I use tweezers, it’s Hanna (her older sister, 23) who taught me, and even the razor for my legs, but mom says it’s better to use wax for your legs... but that hurts too much. When we did it the first time, Hanna said: “Why did you ask mom, I could have helped you...” For my armpits I use a razor, like she taught me, and I color my down, like mom¹³ (Sophie, 12 years old, big city in the Alsace region).

As Mauss states, “the fundamental education that resides in all these techniques consists in making the body adapt to its usages” (Mauss 1934, p. 370). These acts and words are often invisible and unsayable, and they shape children’s bodies on a daily basis through the action of a material that is appropriated and incorporated in exchanges, interactions and actions where the social becomes intertwined with the biography and the family. These transmissions then “become more complex, as that which is transmitted is not only a knowing-how-to-do but also a “knowing-how-to-be” (Julien & Rosselin, 2009, p. 296). This presupposes that at the time of body care, what is at stake is not only the mere transfer of “disincarnated” competences, but also the manufacturing of a person, in the ethnological sense of the word, as rooted in a gender, an age, a family and a generation.

A sensory matrix

Beyond the incitements from adults, and beside exchanging looks or avoiding them, and sharing products, growing up also constitutes an

¹³ Single parent family, Sophie lives with her mother who works as nanny and as a waitress.

opportunity for sensory learning that can lead to an understanding of the moment when “it’s time.” Signals of dirtiness can be seen, felt (for instance the “grease” of unwashed hair) and smelled. As Emma’s account shows, sweat and new body odors are particularly salient elements in the stages of growing up. The mother of a ten-year-old child considers that her daughter’s reluctance to wash is part of the fact that “she has not yet developed any strong odor, so she doesn’t understand when it’s time to wash”. Beyond verbal incitements from family members or from other children who, when they smell the unpleasant odor coming from the armpits, can advise children to wash, there are also non-verbal techniques, for instance smelling clothes to find out when it is time to change them. This sensory awakening has not raised much interest in sociology or anthropology, where cultural representations of the senses have been widely documented (Classen, 1993; Howes, 1991), but where the ways in which such sensory patterns are activated during precise physical practices, and how these interact with the materials that make up each one of us, have received much less attention. The materiality of the body of which we are talking here, even though it is made of biological materials, is not the one studied in biology: moving, grasping, stroking, carrying, bumping into, and other daily repeated actions, are possible because the body is a material that meets other materials, other bodies and objects, but especially because it socializes during encounters.

In conclusion, the acquisition of physical know-how does not only happen through impregnation and sharing in a physical family environment characterized by its own sensory density: the acquisition of a skill for oneself, that can be applied to one’s body – in this case, cleanness – also happens through more formal types of learning where reflexive judgments, material cultures and techniques of the body come together (Wathelet, 2009). All these mediations are socially constructed and shared, and transform an intimate event – the “dirty” and the way it is treated – into a combination that catalyzes children’s discourse and practices, as well as those of their peers, their parents, and other family members.

A repertoire of reformulated practices

How do these techniques of the body, which are based on objects and engage the senses (looking, touching, smelling, hearing) and several actors

at the same time, change? We are here trying to understand the learning processes that allow a gesture to be acquired and become “certain” and socially accepted at a time when the body changes and becomes, in part, a stranger to itself, which imposes both a critical distance and the acquisition of new ways of doing things. This, therefore, is real know-how, where sensory intelligence is combined with affective, relational and expressive dimensions in order to adjust practices to social situations. This relational competence is what Hutchby and Moran Ellis define as “A constantly negotiated dynamic, a phenomenon which is stabilized, to a greater or lesser degree, in and through the interaction between human actors and the material and cultural resources which are available.” The competences are developed and acquired thanks to what Barbara Rogoff calls repertoires of practices, namely “that range of family practices of each one of us, and the possibility of applying them in various formats depending on the circumstances” (Rogoff et al., 2007, pp. 122-123). Rogoff et al. highlight the “dynamic nature of the repertoire of cultural practices, in other words, the formats of interactions which individuals must accept or transform and which they must face or resist” (Rogoff et al., 2007, p. 104). When it comes to body hygiene, changing one’s habits happens with the support of repertoires of practices that vary from one situation to the next. We will show and discuss three main modes: intensification, adjustment and good measure.

Francesco, or intensification

The first mode is intensification. Here the techniques of the body do not seem to change radically but rather change in degree of frequency, intensity or duration. Habits are interiorized, and chains of operations remain fluid and unchanged by the new demands of cleanness, and the gestures follow each other and are incorporated in patterns of actions that are linked together¹⁴. This is the case of Francesco¹⁵, for whom body hygiene is very important. During our interview he distinguishes three very different types

¹⁴ On the importance of turning chains of actions into a routine, and more specifically on the links between one action and the next, see Kaufmann 1997, p. 201.

¹⁵ Mother teacher, father small business owner.

of body care. The first type is the morning bathroom time, which he measures with a stopwatch in order not to be late for school.

In the morning I take about 20 minutes to watch TV, 5 to 10 minutes to wash my feet, in 10 minutes I was everything else, 5 minutes for ... (He starts to laugh), 7 minutes to put my lenses in and get dressed, and at 7h53-54 I'm out the door (Francesco, 13 years old, small city in the Venice region).

A second practice is showering after basketball training and finally, he states that he prefers the third type of washing, where he takes his time and "relaxes": "I need four hours to wash my feet: I fill the bidet with hot water and just stay there ...". The joy of such long and repeated times spent on body care and hygiene is confirmed by his mother who sees this practice as part of the continuum of the practices he learned as a child, who now discovers that the new odors coming from sports shoes or from underneath armpits require additional attention:

Antonella: He spends two hours washing his feet [...] because he uses hot water and he loves that. He washes his feet, his face, he washes under his arms and uses the bidet. But that's my fault because as a child I told him he had to become independent and wash himself. And since he's Swiss and when you tell him something he'll do it all to a T, well then you know that feet need to be washed. Because these kids wear sports shoes and keep them on all day long...

Interviewer: A feast!

Antonella: and even armpits, it's good to wash those. And then he executes the four operations to the letter. Let's say washing over the bidet or washing your feet should be done with hot water and aaaah (she makes a gesture that signifies relaxation) and he'll stay for sixty hours. His father tells me "That's enooooooooough! I can't take any more." And he [Francesco] does it on purpose, because he likes it. And I don't tell him off because it's rather a good thing (Antonella, 45 years old, small city in the Venice region).

The mode of intensification does not constitute a break, but over time becomes part of the of family practices. As Luce Giard states "gestures only last for as long as they remain useful, and this usefulness is maintained through the thousand updates applied by their users and the consensus between them. A gesture is only re-done when it is still held to be efficient, operational, profitable or appropriately necessary compared to the effort it takes" (Giard, 1994, p. 286). What seems notable in this

updating of gestures is the double imperative: updating is recognized as necessary and beneficial and it establishes a durable link between those who operate it, as a continuation of a social relation. In the case of Francesco, it is always his mother who helps him do his hair when he can't get his bangs right: she helps him with the hair gel "shows him the gesture because he does not know how to do it manually" and, once it has been explained, "after one or two attempts he can do it all by himself." Once again, gestures and words are inseparable from learning or correcting a body technique, even when it is part of the continuum of known and experienced practices.

Noemi, or adjustment

Some know-how of body hygiene will cause an update of competences acquired before, while other kinds, on the contrary, will be completely new and require a time to adapt during which the body must get used to the feelings, things and actions that this physical change involves. In this way the arrival of the first period seems to be, for most of the interviewed mothers, especially in Italy, an incitement to keep a closer watch on their daughters' washing practices. However, getting used to these new excretions does not happen all by itself, as it entails a new relationship with the self, with one's body, with one's actions and with the things at one's disposal to contain the menstrual flow. The use of hygienic pads, for instance, shows that "though objects make things, they make us first" (Hennion & Latour, 1993, p. 21):

"Ah the awkwardness of the first day. She was walking funny, her legs wide, and now everything is fine [...] except for last year when we went to the seaside, we tried tampons and did not succeed, poor thing, she's very small, but since her flow is not too heavy, I told her "Listen, take your towel off, bathe, and change right after, it's OK" (Viola, 47 years old, mother of Anna, 12, small city in the Venice region)¹⁶.

This account show that when actors use objects, these objects also act

¹⁶ Mother teacher, father employee.

on them, by sharing in the construction of the subjects (Julien & Rosselin, 2009). This “full contact with the object” through which a material culture modifies the subject by acting on its movements and conduct, happens over time and requires a process which Winance calls “adjustment” (2007). Through the example of the wheelchair, Winance shows how adapting to a wheelchair implies a progressive change of a person’s perception of his/her own body. Several actors exchange, draw attention to this or that aspect of how the wheelchair works, and share ideas about the perception of the body, suggesting new actions until, through “trial, and then usage, the person learns to feel his/her wheelchair, and integrates/incorporates the chair’s reactions” (Winance, 2007, p. 38). This means that there is “real work on the links that unite a person with his/her body, with the wheelchair and with the world, through which the body and the wheelchair are mutually shaped and transformed, both materially and emotionally” (Winance, 2007, p. 40). This process, which requires time and the intervention of several actors, can be gleaned from the way in which Noemi experienced her first period¹⁷:

When I had my first period I said: “No, no, no, what a pain, I don’t want this.” Because I knew it’s a pain (...) and because indeed it is ... because there’s blood, plus you have to wear pads, and you stain the sheets, I already knew I was in for a time of suffering, and my period is particularly difficult, because my belly always really hurts, I have to take painkillers, and I have a heavy flow, so I have to change pads like every hour, it’s so annoying” (Noemi, 13 years old, middle-sized city in Venice region).

In order to contain the menstrual blood, Noemi turns to Rosella, her friend who has the same age and who began to menstruate at the end of primary school, and also to other school friends who are already menstruating. However her mother intervenes in this process of adjustment by showing how acquiring this know-how is not easy and requires, once again, verbal incitements, new techniques of the body and the help of specific products.

Still today, I have a hard time making her understand that she needs to take hygienic pads with her, go to the bathroom regularly to change and, when

¹⁷ Noemi’s parents both work in the restaurant business.

she can, wash often. So I bought her a natural sponge, age-appropriate intimate hygiene products and but it's still a constant fight because I have to tell her 'Go wash yourself!', 'Yes, I'm going to' but then she forgets, she leaves for school without her pads, while her flow is quite abundant and lasts very long, six or seven days of menstruation, and the first days of her period the flow is very abundant and she forgets to change [...] she'll get it, sooner or later she'll get it" (Gaia, 55 years old, mother of Noemi, 13, middle-sized city in Venice region).

The experience of having one's period thus requires a specific reflexivity that is applied in turn to keeping clothes clean, washing, eliminating, odors, and hiding the fact that one is wearing a hygienic pad, organizing one's entries and exits into and from the classroom to go to the bathroom, bathing (or not), managing menstrual cramps at school and at sports games, and if necessary, remembering one's medication. We are not only looking at the emergence of new skills that transform a person but also at a process of capacitation that happens over time, collectively, and that implies several human and non-human actors.

Chloé, or good measure

A third mode lies in the search for the right measure, and applies to the majority of cases, where gestures need to be adapted to the changing body without necessarily having to resort to previously unknown practices. Sometimes, in the case of makeup, hairdos or body odor treatments, children have known and become familiar with the uses of these products for a long time, whether that is during play (for instance makeup applied during a game or for a disguise), on festive occasions or during daily care. With age, however, the gestures that seem so sure no longer correspond to the new status – for instance, “no longer being a child” – or to the new body, like when hair changes texture or body odors intensify. Combing one's hair, putting on perfume, wearing lip gloss or lipstick, or applying nail polish, then become areas of experimenting, where the limitations and boundaries of the new need to be understood, and where the new gestures need to be acquired.

Thus Arthur, who is convinced that “with puberty the hormones make your sweat smell stronger!” (Arthur, 12 years old, big city in the Alsace region) introduces perfume in his repertoire of daily gestures, where

deodorant already had its place. However, he experiences the fact that vaporizing requires a certain amount of skill. Faced with the researcher (Marie-Pierre Julien) he is teased by his mother and older sister because he wears too much: “Wooah, you reek!” His sister explains: “You should just spray twice towards yourself, like this, it’s soaked up by clothes and it doesn’t smell too strong.”

In the same way Stefania, the mother of Anna (12) insists:

Once in a while I give her a hard time because she puts on conditioner and it seems to me that she doesn’t rinse it out well, and the next day her hair already seems greasy. But she’s pretty good. And then I’d be like “But aren’t you ashamed?” She’d go outside or to class with dirty hair” (Stefania, 40 years old, mother of Anna, 10, middle-sized city in Venice region).

The question of good measure thus becomes a central point in the usage of a product, in the choice of color, and in the thin line between seduction, attitudes of girls and attitudes for women, and, to a lesser extent, between the attitudes of boys vs. men. It is the art of moderation and discernment, which is acquired through trial and error. Not to do too much or too little: in this way youngsters elaborate an entire know-how which can only proceed through hits and misses. The adults, meanwhile, observe these “appearances,” where suddenly too much eyeliner has produced much heavier eyelids that show up out of nowhere, hair that has been straightened after a visit to the girlfriend, a red face that has been vigorously rubbed to eliminate any traces of make-up, packs of hair in strands because too much gel has been used, or a perfume that is too heady.

During the interview we had with Chloé¹⁸, in the small city in the Vosges region where she lives, she tells us how she got her first perfume at age six and how, age 12, she has “*moved on*” and now goes out with her grandmother and her grandmother’s sister to buy a perfume that is not too girly but also not too adult. However, having such a personal perfume does not stop her from trying out other fragrances, like her mother’s perfume that comes in a bottle the shape of a “*kind of totally naked woman*” and sometimes, at noon, her grandmother’s perfume, a Nina Ricci she is not supposed to use. During the time of a second participatory observation,

¹⁸ Chloé is the daughter of a nurse and an unemployed worker.

which takes place at her grandmother's house, she shows me the chest of drawers where that perfume is kept, and adds that sometimes she puts some on "without realizing it, and then when I go to class it feels weird because it smells too adult." In Chloe's discourse there is a clear distinction between situations where it is possible to transgress the norm that says that girls should not wear perfumes that are for adult women and which implicitly entail seduction and sensuality, and situations where control of one's appearance is more strongly felt, like in school. Because even though there is plenty of criticism coming from the parents and from siblings, the judgments of teachers and of other children are feared most of all, and a lot of effort is put into observing and seizing the moment someone blunders, fails or makes a mistake in their personal outward appearance and body hygiene.

Blunders as carriers of social and moral judgments

Through all the operations that guarantee clean, presentable and decent bodies, children are thus involved in reflexive processes to adjust to the social spaces they inhabit, and to learn to govern themselves by themselves. However, these techniques have to be permanently adapted, because not only do they need to accommodate the changing body, they also have to follow changes that happen around the child, such as the changing incitements of fashion, the sports the children practice, the demands imposed by the peer group, and the fact of getting older and moving on in school. When talking about their attempts children often report successes, but also blunders, moments of bad taste, and failures, when they have not been able to adapt their way of doing things, their way of dressing or their techniques to the expectations of institutions, adults or peers. Not washing well or not washing enough (like the badly rinsed conditioner), menstrual blood that transpires through clothes, the shape of a pad in one's trousers, hair that is too visible, badly brushed teeth, or excessive sweating can all generate mockery or corrections¹⁹. The worst is ridicule from friends,

¹⁹ And we are here not looking at the play of appearances : out-of-fashion glasses, braces that are too visible, shoes whose color and shape are no longer fashionable, or with heels that are too high, a T-shirt with a pattern that is too "baby" like, or too large for a body that

which makes mistakes in taste difficult and painful in a universe where the norms of self-representation are so subtle. And if these blunders are repeated, the young person becomes the object of more systematic mockery or even of expressions of disgust that can lead to stigmatization or exclusion. Children thus have to constantly control their appearance to the spaces they inhabit and to the time they are in. As Barbara (employee), the mother of Marta (11) rightly points out, “they are in a stage where they begin to measure everything.”

Blunders and warnings constitute opportunities for children to morally judge or classify other children. In our fieldwork we distinguished two different types of inconvenience. The first type is where the blunders are associated with the person’s position in the social space, characterized by marginality or by a difference in class, family, age, or gender. In this way an uncomfortable smell can trigger old fantasies about “the smell of poverty.” A girl in the Vosges who is the object of particularly harsh mockeries at school is described by Chloe as a person who “had difficulties, she was poor so she’d dress a bit badly [...] and people would say “you stink, you stink.” Sometimes the lack of cleanness can be a sign of parental incompetence, as in the account of Francesco, 13, who lives in a small city in Venice, and we talk about a pupil in his class who “nobody wants to sit next to,” “she doesn’t wash herself often, I think, and like in the changing room she puts on deodorant without having washed herself!” Such impropriety is attributed to a family configuration that does not follow the model of the contemporary Italian family which, typically, only has one child:

She’s a girl who smells bad [...] she’s nice, but she has a body odor [...] She has eight brothers after all! I don’t know but I bet her parents can’t keep up...” door (Francesco, 13 years old, small city in the Venice region).

The difference in bathroom practices is even more marked when it comes to gender. In the words of the girls, boys are supposed to sweat more, be less aware of their body hygiene, and pay less attention to

is not very muscular, or too tight around a waist that is too round, makeup that is too heavy, ... all this can trigger sarcasm from peers, who can be quite unforgiving. And if the mistakes in taste continue the young person can become the object of systematic mockery, or even expressions of disgust that can lead to exclusion or stigmatization.

deodorant and perfume. These statements are refuted by our field ethnography: in daily practices of body care, boys pay just as much attention to their appearance as girls. On the male side, the difference with girls is also expressed through the fact that “girls spend their day dolling themselves up,” a practice which is denied by our participatory observations.

Another type of remark refers, through cleanness, to a lack of skill in mastering oneself and one’s body, which is open, uncontrollable and in constant transgression, and would seem more appropriate if applied to younger children: “Roberto, he drools, he stinks and he looks like a bulldozer” (dialogue between Anna and Greta, 10 years old, middle-sized city in the Venice region), “little kids fart and stink” (Ewen 12 years old, big city in the Alsace region), “Boys fart, burp, stick their fingers in their noses, and eat their bogeys” (Melissa, 11 years old, village in the Alsace region). The supposed immaturity of this type of behavior refers to a bad management of one’s excretions, which are ambiguous and require specific treatment, as does everything else the body manufactures and then expulses (Diasio, 2015, p. 673). The age categories expressed through children’s body hygiene concern both the lower limits– and therefore the “small” children – and the upper lines, as with the girls who do “too much” “who think they’re grownups” and, especially in public places, adopt bodies that are smooth and carefully decorated (with perfume, cream, nail polish, make-up) like the bodies of grown-up women. This normative view of “products for children,” of what is “appropriate” for them, and of the techniques of the body they need to apply to appropriate all this, naturalizes age and gender categories and constitutes a consumption that is also a space for moral judgments designating what does or does not make a woman or a man and using goods and products to clarify and reveal certain assignments in the fluid process of classification of people and events (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979). All these “improprieties” are therefore, in the words of the children, linked to social classifications.

Our second type of inconvenience is more linked to a lack of competence in managing social situations. This is the case of Chloé, whom we’ve already mentioned and who goes to school with her grandmother’s perfume on. This type of experiment is totally acceptable at home, but is not appropriate for school. A jagged line thus separates a variety of social situations: pajama parties, family feasts, experiments in the bathroom or in one’s room, the school environment (which in turn entails different

situations depending on whether one is in the classroom, in the playground, in the toilets, or in the gym). Deodorant battles that are accepted in the changing room are considered to be stuff for “small” kids when girlfriends get together for an evening. The makeup that has been tested at home can in no way be worn to school, as Salomé testifies:

I wanted to put some on, once, but my parents saw me before I left! So I had to go and take it off! But I don't wear any to go to school! (Salomé, 11 years old, village in the Alsace region).

The place where these experiments are staged is often the child's room, the bathroom or the places where sports or other after-school activities take place. When children occupy such in-between places, for instance at school, they can use these “corners” over and over to get away from the eyes of the adults and affirm themselves: “In essence the (teen's) places are ‘won out’ from the fabric of adult society, but are also in constant threat of being reclaimed.” (Matthews et al., 2000, p. 281). Depending on the purpose of the practice in question, every place can become a good place for learning. In this way the home environment turns out to be much better when it comes to questioning gender boundaries, and while certain gender-specific attitudes, objects or usages can be experimented at home, there is absolutely no room for them in the peer group. This is the case for creams for the face, the hands, and the body, as well as perfumed oils, or slimming products, products to exfoliate the skin or hide stretch marks, and which sometimes cause conflict between mothers and their daughters, who are accused of emptying the flask “just to give it a try” or “to smell good”.

Children have to not only acquire or modify their techniques of the body, they also have to know how to apply them and differentiate between the social situations in which they are appropriate or not. We are therefore looking at a double-edged adaptation: adapting the body to the new hygiene requirements, and matching the requirements with the contexts and situations in which the child is involved. All this also requires and at the same time generates competence in decoding situations, and in knowing how to play on what is “allowed, prescribed and proscribed” (Desjeux, 1996), on the ways in which boundaries can be tested or pushed, and on the possibility of transferring what has been learned from one situation to the next. Therefore, it is clearly the link between the person, the activity and the situation which allows us to understand how knowledge is acquired.

Learning does not constitute an individual and univocal mental activity: it is a social process that is incarnated, relational, and implies both a belonging to a community and a certain shifting of the focus away from the self (Lave, 1991).

Conclusions

When learning happens in daily life it often does so at chosen moments, in situations of instability and uncertainty, disruption, crisis or transformation. Incorporating new know-how for teens is therefore not an easy task: it's a course filled with uncertainty, error and the snags of daily life, as we have seen from the numerous examples given in this text. Modifying one's body care takes us right to the heart of a range of learning where techniques of the body are updated or elaborated through a large number of mediations which we have identified: language practices, mimetic processes, the journeys of objects, sensory absorption, moral and social judgments. Acquiring this know-how requires great skill in managing all these different demands, and in knowing how to orchestrate and appropriate them. As Sylvia Faure (1999) has also shown, the processes of incorporation and learning are complex activities where the body does not exist outside of language, and where practical sense cannot exclude the actors' reflexivity²⁰.

However, these acquaintances between materiality and language practices, between action and reflection, also require time and accommodation. It is a rocky road "where one bumps into the sharp edges

²⁰ In his study on the learning that happens during classical or contemporary dance training, Faure distinguishes two poles around which most work in sociology and in the anthropology of socialization evolve: on the one hand there is the Bourdieu-inspired idea of "the body as the memory social order [...] an unconscious depository of social structures and the matrix of practices, behaviors, choices, tastes and dislikes. Paradoxically on the other end this theory is met by work that limits itself to a phenomenological approach for which "reason is no longer conceived of as the foundation of the subject, but it is the body that is seen as "the standard," a pre-reflexive, sensitive and sentient point of reference (Faure, 1999, p. 1). For Faure the latter approaches bring out the possible relations between the body and language practices, between the matrix of practice and forms of reflexivity, which may be grasped based on an analysis of processes of transmission and appropriation of knowledge" (Faure, 1999, p. 2).

of a reality that does not conform to the actions of our bodies” (La Cecla, 1996, p. 7). This way of facing objects and incorporating them produces what La Cecla calls authenticity: a way of situating oneself in social life and of carrying its mark on one’s body. Body care then requires an involvement of the subject, “a deciphering of the self by the self” (Foucault, 1984, p. 36), the ability to adapt to the circumstances, “the re-composition of patterns (acquired in the past), depending on a given situation, on the interactions and on the way in which the individuals come to define by themselves what they have incorporated.” (Kaufmann, 1999, p. 85).

Habit does not apply here, and neither does *habitus*, because following Marcel Mauss, it varies with the individuals, with the people being imitated, with the forms of transmission, and with the context²¹. What brings subjects to modify their behavior and to acquire new know-how to adapt to new situations, is the uncommon, the errors, and the difficulties encountered. Describing errors and blunders thus becomes an essential resource in grasping the way the actors’ reflexivity is engaged. Errors also allow one to enhance learning, and to distinguish among the things learned depending on their purpose (to be “clean” for school or for the gym), on the body techniques (the benefits of waxing or shaving will vary according to the age), and on the instrumental relation between body and object which the technique entails (e.g. using pads or a vaporizer).

Caring for one’s body hygiene thus resembles a technology of the self: “in other words [one of the] procedures (...) which are proposed or prescribed to individuals in order to fix, maintain or transform their identity according to a number of purposes, thanks to relations of control of the self by the self, or knowledge of the self by the self. In sum, the point is to replace the imperative “Know thyself,” which seems such a strong characteristic of our civilization, by a vaster question that would also function as its more or less specific context: what to do with oneself? What work to operate on oneself? How to “govern oneself” by performing actions where one is both the object of the actions, their field of application

²¹ We here echo Marcel Mauss, who wanted to show how “these ‘habits’ vary not merely according to the individuals and their imitations, but mainly according to society, education, customs, modes, and prestige” (Mauss, 1993, p. 369). Indeed, we believe that the dynamic dimension of techniques of the body is more important.

and the instrument which they apply and at the same time the acting subject” (Foucault, 1989, p. 134).

Through body care children learn to govern a body in transformation. The concept of governance seems relevant here since, for Foucault, governing refers to the administration of how individuals change and modify themselves. Such governance is neither order nor domination, and neither is it total control of the self over the self; rather it assumes a certain degree of freedom, as well as a margin of uncertainty. It could be described as a disposition to act, on the part of a network of people, materials, texts, technologies, which the subject does not completely master and whose failures and obstacles are interesting because they allow us to interrogate the individual’s critical distance. Governance then presupposes a view of the subject as neither the Cartesian “cogito” nor the sovereign “me” of the sociology of modernity. It is a subject who is “not the master in his own house,” seized in the process between autonomy and heteronomy” (Warnier, 2015).

In light of the theoretical approaches outlined above and the experiences presented here, the idea of a body that is produced by socio-cultural “training,” which mirrors social structures through pre-reflexive and infra-linguistic inculcation, seems too limited. When it is tested out through fieldwork, this concept turns out to be based on a theory of socialization in which children and teens would only be the product of incorporated dispositions that are accumulated passively and gradually, and whose sole aim would be to obtain access to the adult world (Prout 2000). It is based on a limited view of socialization which, as Alanen (1988) shows, cannot be seen as a linear internalization, but should be approached as complex construction, and as a process where children become actors and agents. The ethnological observations which we were able to make in our fieldwork are indeed pervaded by a clear opposition between educators and educated, as it is deployed in the arena of socialization. Because when adults are faced with children who are actively experimenting, they are not always in a position of power. Driven by a well-meaning attitude of surveillance, they inquire to see whether norms governing the body are being observed, while at the same time respecting the intimacy of the children. The adults too are thus also trying things out and wondering where the limits should lie. They too learn from their children’s experiences, like the divorced father Georges who unexpectedly learns how to remove menstrual bloodstains from his daughter Louise’s (13 years old)

sheets and who, after a number of misses, becomes an expert in washing techniques and products.

Learning is thus shaped as one of those reciprocal actions described by Simmel (1917), which, through mutual friction modify both the adults and the children. The failures, imperfect transmissions (imperfect as any transmission for that matter) and the inconveniences all allow us to see these moments of sharing, the journeys of the shared objects and affections, and the ways in which, through all this, cultures and subjects make and remake themselves.

References

- Alanen, L. (1988). Rethinking Childhood. *Acta Sociologica*, 31, 53-67.
- Ariès, P. (1987). Pour une histoire de la vie privée. In P., Ariès, G. Duby (Eds.), *Histoire de la vie privée* (pp. 7-22). Paris: Seuil.
- Balandier, G. (1983). Essai d'identification du quotidien. *Cahiers Internationaux de sociologie*, 74, 5-12. Retrieved from http://classiques.uqac.ca/contemporains/balandier_georges/essai_identification_quotidien/essai_texte.html
- Bateson, G., & Mead, M. (1942). *Balinese Character: a Photographic Analysis*. New York, NY Academy of Sciences.
- Bauman, Z. (1995). *Life in Fragments. Essays in Postmodern Morality*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Benedict, R. (1946). *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.
- Bergson, H. (1986). *L'évolution créatrice*. Paris, PUF.
- Berry, V. (2008). Genèse et perspective des communautés de pratiques. Entretien avec Etienne Wenger. *Pratiques de formation. Analyses*, 54, 177-190.
- Bourdieu, P. (1980). *Le sens pratique*. Paris: Ed. de Minuit.
- Brogère, G. (2009a). Vie quotidienne et apprentissages. In G. Brogère, A.-L. Ulmann (Eds.), *Apprendre de la vie quotidienne* (pp. 21-31). Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Brogère, G. (2009b). Une théorie de l'apprentissage adaptée: l'apprentissage comme participation. In G. Brogère, A.-L. Ulmann (Eds.), *Apprendre de la vie quotidienne* (pp. 207-278). Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. New York London: Routledge.
- Classen, C. (1993). *World of Senses: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures*. London: Routledge.
- Corbin, A. (1987). Les secrets de l'individu. In P. Ariès, G. Duby (Eds.), *Histoire de la vie privée* (pp. 284-320). Paris: Seuil.

- Diasio, N. (2017). Puberté : la fabrique des regards, *Revue de Socio-Anthropologie de l'Adolescence*, 1, 3-20. Retrieved from <http://revue-rsaa.com/index.php/les-numeros/numero-1-les-discours-experts/81-1-puberte-la-fabrique-des-regards>
- Diasio, N. (2015). Des odeurs et des âges, *Ethnologie française*, 4(LX), 665-676.
- Diasio, N., & Vinel, V. (2015). La salle de bain : reconfiguration des rapports aux autres et à soi à l'aube de l'adolescence. *Revue internationale d'éducation familiale*, 37, 39-61.
- Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and taboo*. London: Kegan.
- Douglas, M., & Isherwood, B. (1979). *The world of goods*. New York: Basic Books.
- Duthika-Scarpa, M. (2012). *Per un'antropologia della preadolescenza: spazi e corpi in divenire tra infanzia e adolescenza*. Thesis, University of Milano-Bicocca (Italy).
- Elias, N. (1973). *La civilisation des mœurs*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy.
- Faure, S. (1999). Le processus d'incorporation et d'appropriation des savoir-faire du danseur. *Education et Sociétés*, 4(2), 75-90.
- Ferroni, G. (1983). Frammenti di un discorso sul comico. In D. Della Terza, G. Ferroni, G. Gronda, I. Paccagnella, G. Scalise (Eds.), *Ambiguità del comico* (pp. 15-79). Palermo: Sellerio.
- Foucault, M. (1989). *Résumé des cours 1970-1982. Conférences, essais et leçons du Collège de France*. Paris: Julliard.
- Foucault, M. (1984). *Histoire de la sexualité. L'usage des plaisirs*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Gebauer, G., & Wulf, C. (1994). *Mimésis. Culture-Art-Société* Paris: Les éditions du Cerf.
- Giard, L. (1994). Faire la cuisine. In M. de Certeau, L. Giard, P. Mayol (Eds.), *L'invention du quotidien 2. Habiter, cuisiner*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Hennion, A., & Latour, B. (1993). Objet d'art, objet de science. Note sur les limites de l'anti-fétichisme. *Sociologie de l'art*, 6, 7-24.
- Howes, D. (1991) (Ed.). *The Varieties of Sensory Experience. A sourcebook in the Anthropology of Senses*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Hutchby, I., & Moran-Ellis, J. (1998) (Eds.). *Children and Social Competence. Arenas of Action*. London: Falmer Press.
- James, A. (1993). *Chidwood Identities: self and social relationships in the Experience of the child*. Edinburgh: EUP.
- James A., Jenks, C., & Prout, A. (1998). *Theorizing Childhood*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Julien, M. P., & Warnier, J. P. (1999). *Approches de la culture matérielle. Corps à corps avec l'objet*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Julien, M. P., & Rosselin, C. (2009) (Ed.). *Le sujet contre les objets...tout contre. Ethnographies de cultures matérielles*. Paris: CTHS.
- Kaufmann, J. C. (1992). *La trame conjugale*. Paris: Nathan.
- Kaufmann, J. C. (1997). *Le cœur à l'ouvrage. Théorie de l'action ménagère*. Paris: Nathan Pocket.
- La Cecla, F. (1996). *Saperci fare. Corpi e autenticità*. Milano: Elèuthera.
- Lave, J. (1991). Acquisitions des savoirs et pratiques de groupe. Situating Learning in Communities of practice. *Sociologie et sociétés*, 23(1), 145-162. Retrieved from <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/001418ar>
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning – Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mauss, M. (1993). Les techniques du corps. *Sociologie et anthropologie* (pp. 363-386).

- Paris: PUF.
- Memmi, D. (2009). Pierre Bourdieu: le corps dénaturalisé. In D. Memmi, D. Guillo, O. Martin (Eds.), *La tentation du corps* (pp. 71-94). Paris: EHESS.
- Prout, A. (2000). Childhood Bodies: Construction, Agency and Hybridity. In A. Prout (Ed.), *The Body, Childhood and Society* (pp. 1-8). London-New York: MacMillan St. Martin's Press.
- Remotti, F. (2003). De l'incomplétude. In F. Afférgan, S. Borutti, C. Calame, U. Fabietti, M. Kilani, F. Remotti (Eds.), *Figures de l'humain* (pp. 19-74). Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS.
- Rogoff, B., Moore, L., Najafi, B., Dexter, A. Correa-Chavez, M., & Solis, J. (2007). Développement des répertoires culturels et participation des enfants aux pratiques quotidiennes. In G. Brougère, M. Vandembroeck (Eds.), *Repenser l'éducation des jeunes enfants*. Bruxelles: P.I.E. Peter Lang.
- Sansot, P. (2003). *Bains d'enfance*. Paris: Payot.
- Simmel, G. (1917). *Sociologie et épistémologie*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Sirota, R. (2006) (Ed.). *Éléments pour une sociologie de l'enfance*. Rennes: PUR.
- Tillard, B. (2014). L'espace domestique des familles populaires: l'enfant vu comme acteur du groupe familial, *Le Télémaque*, 46, 135-152.
- Vigarelli, G. (1984). *Le propre et le sale*. Paris: Seuil.
- Vinel, V. (2017). En famille: une libération de la parole sur le corps sexuel? In N. Diasio, V. Vinel (Eds.), *Corps et préadolescence. Intime, privé, public* (pp. 61-78). Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.
- Voléry, I. (2017). Pédagogies de l'intime : apprendre la juste distance aux autres et à soi dans les espaces scolaires et de loisirs. In N. Diasio, V. Vinel (Eds.), *Corps et préadolescence. Intime, privé, public* (pp. 23-43). Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.
- Wathelet, O. (2009). *Anthropologie de la transmission des savoirs et savoir-faire sensoriels. Etude de cas: la transmission 'un patrimoine olfactif à l'intérieur de la famille*. Doctoral Thesis, University of Nice – Sophia Antipolis (France).
- Whiting, B. B. (1963) (Ed.). *Six Cultures. Studies of Child Rearing*. New York-London: John Wiley and Sons.
- Whiting, J. W. M., & Child, I. L. (1953). *Child Training and personality. A Cross-Cultural Study*. New Haven-London: Yale University Press.
- Warnier, J. P. (2015). Foucault, usager de Lacan. Ou comment penser le sujet, mais autrement. In P. Hintermeyer (Ed.), *Foucault post-mortem en Europe*. Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg.
- Winance, M. (2007). Du malaise au faire corps: le processus d'ajustement. *Communications. Corps et techniques*, 81, 31-45.