



# THE ENVIRONMENTAL SELF

**Else I. Wiestad<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Professor emeritus in philosophy, University of Oslo, Norway

## Abstract

*The self is relational in a wide sense and is constituted, Else I. Wiestad argues, not only through the influence of social and cultural, but also of bodily and environmental factors. The spatio-bodily self constitutes itself through interactive processes in a locale.*

**Keywords:** Spatial subject, Self-constitution, Localisation, Gendered places, Intentionality

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## The spatiality of the self

In the following I try to unveil and interpret some of the significance of the relation between body and environments for subjectivation. I direct attention towards the tacit dialectic between body and space that we always assume, but to a lesser degree are conscious of, or take into consideration. Thus I emphasize a spatio-bodily and gendered concept of subjectivity that is relational in a wide, environmental as well as socio-cultural sense.

As corporeal beings we are always *somewhere*, we are at any time located or in *locus*, as we are for instance in a university auditorium or sitting under an old apple tree.

How then are we influenced by the Otherness of our surroundings? Consider the interconnection between the body's experiences of space and the formation of a self. To some extent the self takes form in its initial meeting with the "not-me", which reveals that there is also a "me". The environmental Other reveals the Self.

The interaction between body and *locus* deals with central aspects of subjectivation, with how we adapt to and are able to act, and become disposed to act, in a given place at a particular time. As living bodies we are in constant interaction with *locus*, and our existence is always and at any time local.

Our calendars of life also include calendars of space: they consist not only of a series of *whens*, but also of a multitude of *wheres*.

What then is the significance of the environments for the constitution of subjectivity? The fundamental relation between body and space is a condition for our possibility of action and interaction in the world. A place makes us able to act and react, and in certain environments some actions become possible or impossible for us.

A subject has often been emphasized as being formed by intersubjective discourse and by being positioned in relation to social, cultural, and ethnic background as well as sexual preference. In addition to these factors, I focus on a silent or forgotten spatial dimension, tied to a wide range of senso-motoric impressions, such as landscape, temperature, form and touch.

Wherever we are, the surrounding world influences to a larger or smaller degree our experiences, habits and intended actions. The concept of a self should therefore include the living body's spatiality, its constant exposure to and interplay with place and space.

The body is my "general way to have a world", according to the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the spatiality of the body is a condition for touching, hearing, seeing, perceiving, and comprehending the world (Merleau-Ponty 1994:102).

There is no subjectivation without a world, Merleau-Ponty points out in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1998). We are always in the world, and only in the world do we know ourselves.

The human being is always in a process of self-constitution, in a field which is our own body's history as well as prospective future. I am free, not in spite of, but by the means of the motivations that follows from my existence as a bodily and historical being (Merleau-Ponty 1998:Preface, xi; Part III, 3).

Thus, it is a fundamental understanding with Maurice Merleau-Ponty that the body as a meaningful totality is included in and belongs to a surrounding world. All the abilities and organs of the body form a psychophysical unit that is more or less intimately attuned to its surrounding space (Merleau-Ponty 1994).

His concept of a *natural intentionality*, points to a bodily relationship to the world that comes before speaking or any conscious act of thinking. Ahead of thinking the body already intends something (*Ibid.*).

The movable body expresses a spatial and perceptual directionality: If I stretch out a hand to grab an apple, I do this before I have consciously thought that here is a hand that can move an apple to the mouth. We carry with us a number of unstated, prior intentions that a conscious reflection presupposes and builds on (*Ibid.*).

Our immediately perceived space offers access to the world of real life, to its structures, norms for usage and contents of meaning.

In phenomenology the *world* for human beings is both a given surrounding and the domain where we live, care for and handle things and human relations. It signifies according to the philosopher Edmund Husserl the ordinary *lifeworld* that we count on, without necessarily paying it much attention, the common field where we live and move around.

A phenomenology of space describe space as open and horizon-expanding (Heidegger 1993), as demarcated and intimate (Bachelard 1964), or as the space and rooms occupied by the human body (Merlau-Ponty 1998, Irigaray 1984, 1993).

That we are *in* the world is according to Martin Heidegger not a quality of human beings, but a condition of existence (*Seinsverhältnis*) that we have when faced with the world (Heidegger 1993). Subjectivation is thus the product of a dialectic between outer and inner fields. Or expressed like Toril Moi interprets de Beauvoir, a woman defines herself “through what she does with whatever the world do with her” (Moi 1998:107). The active process goes on throughout her whole life.

As far as subjectivity is founded in bodily experiences, and in the interplay between the body and its milieu, localization will also influence the way in which we become individualized.<sup>i</sup>

Instead of a generalized or “universal Self”, the starting point can be the “localized Self” and the various environmental factors that co-constitute our actions, choices and ways of being engaged in the world.

### **Place and space - a rediscovered dimension**

*Place* is today rediscovered as a “forgotten dimension” in several academic fields. The turn towards place and space, and the attention to space in social and cultural life have created new inter-disciplinary meeting places.

The view that place cannot *per se* be regarded as fixed and unambiguous is shared by several researches both in the cultural and social sciences (Casey 1993). They study the effect of place and space in the world of nature, in gender relations, in the sociology of cities, in nomadism, in poetic imagery, architecture and religion.

*Place and space* are frequently used in connection with contextualization. Local production of opinions, of systems of knowledge, of realities and symbols, are concepts that are applied in several academic fields (Tonboe 1993; Østerberg 1998; Skogheim 1999).<sup>ii</sup>

Places may be described as something forming contextual elements in people’s everyday life, elements that is created and changed. Places are where human beings live, experience, and comprehend the world and themselves. Thus, place and space as phenomena emerge as meaningful social and cultural contexts, consisting of various forms of practises, relations, symbols and meanings.<sup>iii</sup>

To deconstruct and reform classifications in space and interpret their meaning has become a central project in gender theory in the social and cultural sciences (Louis and Pape 1991; Rose 1993; Blunt and Rose 1994; Massey 1994; Schaeffer 1994; Birkeland 2002). The studies reveal for instance how and to what extent place and space order and structure our daily lives. Also gendered identities and differences manifest themselves in space as much materially as symbolically.

### **Gendered places**

Contextualization of men and women, to make visible *where* women and men move and can expose themselves, opens for a discussion of *who* they are, and may become, in given contexts, and how they may represent and position themselves in these contexts.

Studies of gendered identity take women’s bodies and everyday experiences as starting-points, and emphasize the situatedness of women’s bodies in social as well as physical environments (Moi 1998; Prieur 1998; Seip 2004; Pettersen 2020; Varden 2020).

We incorporate gendered ways to use our bodies in space and place, and men and women experience and move differently in space. Studies demonstrate that freedom of movement in space in many societies is far more limited for women than for men (Young 2005).

If a body is gendered in ways that limit women’s physical capacities, it will also restrict their capacity as acting agents in the world (Howson 2005).

Consider the vital importance for a living body to have a space where it can move and act. It makes a decisive difference if an innocent human being is locked-up and imprisoned in a cellar, as was the shocking case with Elisabeth Fritzl in Austria.

Elisabeth was locked-up by her father in a cellar for twenty-four years, gave birth to seven of their children and raised three of them in a basement without daylight (Aftenposten 04. 2008). To imprison and deprive an innocent person and her children free access to the surrounding world in this way is a very serious crime.

We are also decisively influenced, if we, like Afghanistan refugees from war in the autumn 2021, wander off with a few belongings, searching for a place where to be and stay (Aftenposten 09.2021). As refugees, women and children are in a particularly vulnerable position.

In a lesser measure, doors, windows and gates also tell a story. Above an old Norwegian front door from 1793 we read an inscription on a plaque: "The first floor of this house is through a legacy reserved for the care of poor widows, where they may also have six beds at their disposal." Being a widow without means, tells both a social story and the story of the dependent women's place-lessness in the world.

The history of gendered places may be read from constructed buildings, their different forms, functions and symbols. Man-made space, either rural or urban, can serve as a perspective on how different cultures and epochs comprehend gender, and how men and women are placed and ranked inside these contexts.

The idea of the universal rational subject applicable to anyone, irrespective of when and where, under-communicate that environmental conditions, practices, and gender, contributes to structuring the individual's self-experiences and self-expressions.

A British woman described how she at the age of ten travelled from the outskirts of the town where they lived to Manchester. She noted that an extended stretch of the Mersey riverbank was laid out for rugby and football fields. These were occupied by boys who ran after balls.

It dawned on her that this entire large area was reserved only for boys. She realized that she did not identify with these fields (Massey 1994). They belonged to another world and another self-experience than hers.

Gender systems are produced in specific places at particular times, and in many ways gender is experienced and formed locally. An investigation from Finland of subjectivity as it is experienced in people's everyday life, brings out that the local and cultural background forms an important context for gendered self-knowledge (Ronkainen 1996).

If we read houses and buildings as comprehensive systems of cultural inscriptions in space that must be interpreted (Barthes 1994), we may also interpret them as masculine or feminine. Suburbs or dormitory towns for instance may be read as forms of a structural oppression of women. The history of gender is depicted in the history of man-made space, in its forms, functions and ways for organizing everyday life.

If we walk in a city and look at streets, buildings and parks, the city space speaks differently to men and women who live and move around there. The undertext for instance of Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul* uncovers glaring differences in men's and women's use of the city space. "Istanbul's fate is my fate: I am tied to this city because it has shaped me into what I am", writes the Turkish Nobel Prize winner about his relationship to the city (Pamuk 2005:6, 324).

His text *Istanbul* reveals how different the urban experience may be for a man and a woman. While the book's male subject roams about the streets until four o'clock in the morning, his mother complains that she must sit at home one evening after another, waiting for a husband who is in the club, out on town or with a mistress. How did the city *Istanbul* shape her as a person, and what opportunities did it give her to form her fate?

If we direct our attention away from the body as an isolated system and towards the dialectics between body and space, or towards space as bodily experiences, this contributes to extend our understanding of subjectivity or self.

It makes it easier to see the connection between geographical variations in the construction of place and space, and the construction of gendered identities in different cultural and geographical areas. The history of the body-subject also includes a history of the interconnection between the body and its surrounding world.

The turn towards the body in academic feminism, and investigations of body and materiality, have often depicted a body that is relatively unchanging and without a place or context, or the body is put into special contexts, such as in the sociology of health and illness, of anthropology or geography (Howson 2005).

If we regard the living body as an interactive participant in social and cultural processes, it becomes possible to challenge the long tradition that has granted privilege to a rationalistic concept of subject and reason, leading to an abstract and dematerialized understanding of subjectivity.

Instead, it becomes more important to see where the living body is situated, and to ask the questions: *Where* and under what conditions have men and women acted or been oppressed?

The subjection of women becomes more a question of understanding the female body as a place of oppression, or where oppression is localized, and to give new interpretations of women's active presence and practices in these localities (Rich 2003).

By moving from a rationalistic concept of subject to the *where* of men and women's daily lives and activities, we return to the question of how and where the body is represented and positioned in space.

## Practical intentionality

We invest our body in the relation we have to the world, which implies that we are already present and engaged in the world. It influences how much consideration and attention we put in, and which adjustments it demands, according to Pierre Bourdieu (1999).

The profound effect on the individual of *habitat* (place of residence) and of being *habituated*, may be captured by extending the concept *habitus* (attitude or bearing) of Pierre Bourdieu, by shifting the emphasis from the social to the spatial field, and at the same time by retaining both. For Bourdieu *habitus* consists of local patterns of understanding, evaluation and acting, that one is used to (Bourdieu 1999).

The patterns are tied to a practical knowledge based on localization and stimuli that we become disposed to react on, and that we constantly form new adaptations to. On the other hand, the illusion of a ‘consciousness without inertia’, without an exterior and a past, is according to Bourdieu (1992) an illusion born of an intellectual’s (that is of Sartre’s) personal experience as a pure, free-floating subject.

Our practical intentionality is rooted in the body and its surroundings, in its memory, history and processes of storing. Both men’s and women’s use of space is patterned by bodily practices. They are continued and renewed in everyday life, in its different situations and fields of action. They become implied in gradually incorporated habits and skills, which in turn co-determine our cognitive, practical and affective behavior.

Our spatio-bodily habits are a product of the body’s interaction with both social and physical surroundings, of the incorporation of their contexts, structures, and directions for use.

Even intellectual skills such as consciousness and the use of language are locally produced in specific surroundings. Women and men live in particular epistemological and identity forming terrains (Code 1993). Anyone with knowledge or consciousness of self is always in a place that both limits and makes possible the knowledge or self-apprehension.

### Kitchen in transformation – an example

If we choose to focus on the intimate rooms of everyday life, the kitchen exemplifies the relation between room and changing conceptions of a male and female identity.

The connection between the rooms in houses and identity is, however, not without problems. The different rooms to which men and women have had access, have been limited to or been refused admission, may be read as expressions of shifting conditions and understanding of maleness and femaleness, and of different phases in their history.

Both sexes develop a practical knowledge of a well-known dwelling. It represents precise skills that prolong our physical manner of behaviour through closely rehearsed and incorporated habits.

We all *know* the steps, the rooms, the bathroom, the closets and cellar of the house we live in. They are physically inscribed in us, and represent, according to Gaston Bachelard, a group of organic habits, forming a framework in our interior being (Bachelard 1964).

The kitchen can be described as a fundamental form mirroring the conception of maleness and femaleness in certain periods and its significance in our culture (Povlsen 1991). Traditionally domestic skills and practices to a large extent have been gendered.

Around 1900 the anonymity of the middle-class city-kitchen in Nordic European countries, and the kitchens clear separation from other rooms, bore witness to how women’s work was trivialized and made invisible.

Today men, women, children and guests in Nordic countries are on their way into open kitchens and all-purpose rooms. As the commonality of house and family conditions changes in form and content, the practical and symbolic links between rooms and gender is in alteration.

The modernization and technification of housework got started in the years 1960-70, and can be regarded as an expression of the Nordic femaleness and maleness in transformation. As men moves in, the status of the kitchen is heightened and the room supplied with new resources. In a radio reportage from the 1970’s a husband who takes part in the housework declares: “We deserve a washing machine!” (Norwegian Broadcasting System, P 2, 2007).

The big wave of kitchen modernization in the 1980’s coincides not only with changing family relations, but also with a new understanding of maleness and femaleness. The new kitchen and the new man and woman reached a form that was meant to synthesize some apparently opposite implications in the past and in the present. Nostalgic French or Nordic farm kitchens became fashionable (Povlsen 1991). In earlier times the open farmhouse kitchen was the meeting place for everyone in an extended household.

Over the last few decades women’s choice of *both* family and paid work has contributed to a more technically functional and pluralistic content of the kitchen. Both kitchens and men and women shall comply with a number of functions. They shall be effective and well organized, and at the same time empathetic and cheerful, and preferably express an awareness of style (*Ibid.*). Both are expected to represent a well-functioning social and emotional space that the family want to identify with.

In short, the modernized kitchen has become a practical room that functions as a place where family, friends and an extended community with yours, mine and common children, all come together. In this connection the picture in an advertisement of a *durable, practical and hygienic bench in steel* becomes not just a piece of utilitarian equipment, but also a symbol of the assumed steel-like durability the woman of our time.

Contrary to this trend, the philosopher Luce Irigaray calls attention to the importance of having ones own rooms for the constituting of self. She insists that to have their own places is as important for women as to have their own voices. Only by establishing gender separated but hospitable rooms, are women able to clearly express a female identity (Irigaray 1984, 1993).

By focusing on the existential importance of our embodied selves, and on the meaning of separate and gendered places, Irigaray point out the connection between gendered subjectivity and *locus*.

However, it is not unproblematic to bring a feminism of gender differences into the considerations of the significance of space. Traditionally women have to a great extent been restricted to the kitchen, and today they want access to a larger world where they can express and expose themselves. Besides Irigaray risks to emphasize women's radically different otherness in a way that may contribute to making gender differences clearly marked out and overly unambiguous. She thereby under-communicate the compound and variable aspects of being male or female.

### Spatio-bodily Self

To fully understand the body-subject we must include a concept of the environment where the body perceives, moves and expresses itself. If we accentuate the living body as materiality, we also presuppose the body's sensorimotoric capability, and the space that renders possible any bodily activity whatsoever.

Instead of an over-individual subject without a world, we may put forward a gendered subject situated in space and time. Subjectivity is constituted within given contexts that imply a spatial dimension, a relation to *locus*. Therefore, if we try to understand who we are and want to be, this understanding will have to include both environmental and intersubjective aspects.

A spatio-somatic concept of self, breaks with the postmodern conception of a fluid and fragmented self, and also with the idea of a social or cultural constructed self that is sufficiently ambiguous to be removed from all common frameworks and features. However, even a nomadic subject is always *somewhere*, while on the move from one specific place to another.

A relational and spatial concept of subjectivity is not a fixed system concept, but a processual concept tied to intentionality and interaction. The subject is not without substance, fluid and multi-centered, but is a movable and localized subject that experiences spatio-somatic borders and possibilities for adaptation and action.

Thus the surroundings do not merely constitute a framework around our daily activities and existence, but become deeply deposited as spatial knowledge and mastery in body and mind. The imprint created by environmental impressions, including spatio-bodily skills, bonds and memories, become over time a part of our self-experience.

Impressions of the surrounding world are incorporated in the individual as his or her life history, knowledge and dispositions for involvement and action, and thus co-constitute his or her self.

The self is not just an inner core or a center for experiences, or an essence without a body and senses. The spatio-bodily self can neither fully transcend, nor stand isolated from the surrounding world. It is not like a limited container filled with its content, or a stream of impressions that we, figuratively speaking, assume we may round up and separate from everything else.

The spatio-bodily subject is rather interactive and complex, and branches out in experiences and relations to a surrounding world marked both by continuity and change. The bodily and gendered self thus constitutes itself through interactive processes in time and space.

## End Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Rationality is not independent of the body, as is emphasized by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), but comes into being in our brains, bodies and bodily experiences. Fundamental philosophical concepts like *the self* are, according to Lakoff and Johnson, conditioned by the neural systems governing the senses and motions. Also the surrounding environment directly influences the development and use of our cognitive abilities (Lakoff and Johnson 1999:4-6).

<sup>ii</sup> The relation to place and space, and the way the self meets challenges in its surroundings, are fundamental for the development of the self, according to environmental psychologist Proshansky (1983:59-63). The cognitive aspects of his notion *place identity* include memories, emotions and interpretations of the physical surroundings where a person lives. In Proshansky's studies gender and age are called attention to as important aspects in this process.

Other phenomenological and pedagogical investigations point out the significance for girls and boys of spatial self-expression, and emphasize the bodily foundation for subjectivation and for learning (see e.g. Rasmussen 1996; Wiestad 2002, 2006, 2014).

<sup>iii</sup> The influence from the humanities on social sciences, especially from phenomenological and existential philosophy, has inspired for example social geographers to leave the quantitative spatial concept of positivism and turn to a concept of qualitative space based more on experiences and impressions. Place and space are rather regarded as the subjective and directly experienced surroundings of human beings.

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