

Encyclopedia of Gender and Society

Body Image

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The human body is understood as both a physiological creation and a social construct. Individuals experience [p. 82 ↓] their bodies through a web of interconnected meaning and practices defined by the societies in which they live. Bodies are reflections of social norms, cultural practices, identity, and self-expression. The organization of gender within a society (e.g., male, female, transgender, and intersex) and the socialization of individuals into the expected roles and behaviors dis-parately associated with each gender inform how we manage perceptions of bodies. Individuals follow these norms of gendered behavior because their identities and self-esteem are determined by the extent to which they meet social expectations. There are high social rewards for women and men performing their gender roles according to socially acceptable norms. Social relationships, familial ties, and upward social mobility are all connected to how well individuals perform gender roles. For those that fall outside of the traditional Western cultural binary of male and female—transgender and intersex just to name a few—social consequences are high, including alienation from both formal and informal social and familial networks and discrimination in the public sphere.

Discussions on body image include a close examination of the connection between sex and gender, body ideals and societal standards of beauty, and the perpetuation of a culture of thinness. Cultural and ethnic differentiation also impact how these ideals are negotiated. Individuals, particularly women but increasingly men, fall prey to these ideals, which are promoted through manufactured body images in popular culture. Methods of controlling body weight are used to meet these beauty ideals through eating-disordered behaviors, dieting, and cosmetic surgeries.

Sex and Gender

Sociologists of gender argue that differences between men and women that have historically been thought of as biological or natural are actually produced through social practices that persuade men and women to use their bodies differently. Sex and gender are two social categories that are often intertwined. Sex is a category of self-identification and presentation that is assumed to be congruent with biological criteria for classification as female or male. These biological criteria include chromosomes, hormones, genitalia, and pro-creative organs. *Gender* is a category based on the sex

assigned at birth, which produces patterns of social expectations for bodies, behavior, emotions, and family and work roles.

Gender display refers to the ways that individuals manage their presentation of self as a gendered body through the use of symbols, attitudes, and physical activities appropriate to one's sex category. Men are often expected to be confident, rational actors, while women are expected to be nurturing and obedient. Gender also determines social roles, like that of mother and father, and the type of worker one is, like domestic caregiver (female) versus corporate executive (male). Gender behaviors are valued differently and produce different social outcomes for men and women. While women have entered the workforce at varying positions en masse in the latter part of the 20th century, they are still overwhelmingly in positions that earn wages significantly lower than men's wages. Thus, men and women have different relationships with their bodies, which has direct implications on how men and women are situated within the domestic sphere and the labor force.

In terms of body norms, there is a double standard of beauty for men and women. Men and women relate to their bodies differently, and while men are socialized to be concerned with their bodies, physical appearance plays a greater role in societal perceptions and treatment of women. In Western cultures, women have been associated with nature—body, land, childbirth, caregiving—while men have been associated with culture—the mind, abstract reason. Human dominion over nature and the mind's domination over the body are embodied in the male/female dichotomy. Ideas about women and the body shape gender ideologies and reinforce what is called *biological determinism*, or the tendency to see women in terms of their reproductive and biological selves. Gender studies scholars incorporate nuanced analyses of the social construction of gender and the impact of stereotypical roles on both male and female perceptions of body ideals. However, feminist scholars emphasize the disparate relations of power between men and women and that the body and its expression have stronger repercussions for women's lives.

Body and Beauty Ideals

Norms and ideals about standard body shapes are culturally expressed in intentional and unintentional ways. Boys and girls learn these standards from a young age through the types of toys and play activity that is encouraged by adults. Females are represented in the tall, busty image of “Barbie.” Although the doll has morphed into many identities that represent women of varying employment status and ethnicities, her basic [p. 83 ↓] body frame remains a constant illustration of the ideal that girls should strive for. Boys learn their place in society through the buff, tanned, militarily trained action figures that symbolize strength, endurance, and courage. They are socialized to be the protector of both society and home. Boys often develop a connected relationship with their bodies because they learn that it is through physical strength and intellectual development that masculinity is defined. Girls often develop a negative association with their bodies because it is through physical beauty and deference to male authority that femininity is defined.

Beauty ideals reflect various relations of power in society. American beauty ideals are connected to the production and consumption of products that enhance body aesthetics and morph phenotype. The industries of fashion, cosmetics, hair, diet and exercise, food, entertainment, advertising, and plastic surgery profit from maintaining the beauty myth. Popular media reinforce the myth by recycling images of tough, virile men juxtaposed with petite, demure women, whose role is to be rescued by the former.

Consumers also internalize these norms and receive positive and negative reinforcement for conforming to or resisting them. People engage in what are called *disciplinary practices*, or the taken-for-granted routinized behaviors that involve social control in that we spend time, money, and effort and instill meaning in the practices. These practices include shaving, applying makeup, and altering hair by using any number of chemical products and electric hardware. For women, these practices are tied to staying thin, petite, and young.

The Culture of Thinness

Western cultural standards of beauty and attractiveness promote an unhealthy body ideal for women to be thin. The physical body has become a measure of value for women. Signs of this “culture of thinness” are visible in popular media, including magazines, television, film, and music. These outlets encourage women to be thin through the use of unhealthy diet and weight control methods in order to feel good about themselves, be successful at work and school, and attract friends and romantic partners. Research suggests that exposure to computer-modified images of young, thin women is linked to depression, a significant decrease in self-esteem, and the development of unhealthy diet practices in women and girls.

Advertising and the fashion industry have been targets of severe scrutiny for maintaining unrealistic standards of beauty. The average model today weighs 23 percent less than the average woman, compared with 20 years ago, when models weighed 8 percent less. Women's high-end fashion brands rarely produce clothing larger than a size 12. The average American woman is a size 14. While the demand for plus-size clothing has significantly increased in recent years, there is still a perception among the fashion elite that smaller sizes are more desirable.

Associated with the positive reinforcement of thinness is the related stigma associated with fat. A survey conducted by the Alliance for Eating Disorders Awareness reports that women age 18 to 25 would rather be hit by a truck than be fat. Two thirds surveyed also reported that they would rather be stupid or mean than be fat. Being overweight is often used to judge a woman's limited worth. Perceived as incapable of living up to society's attractiveness standard, overweight women are subject to increased forms of shame and ridicule, as evidenced by their harsh treatment in film and television. The obsession to be thin leads women to turn to harmful eating-disordered behavior and to develop an unrealistic sense of self.

Eating-Disordered Behavior and Body Dysmorphia

While eating disorders function on an individual level, they are culturally mediated through environmental conditions associated with the politics of gender and sexuality. Scholars think about this behavior in two ways. The first set of behaviors are referred to as *eating disorders*, including anorexia nervosa (self-starvation), bulimia nervosa (binge eating with vomiting and/or laxative use), compulsive eating (uncontrolled eating) and muscle dysmorphia (fear of being not sufficiently muscled). The second set of behaviors are known as *general eating-disordered behaviors* and include occasional bingeing, fasting, compulsive food habits, obsessive dieting, and overexercising.

Eating-disordered behavior typically stems from individual body *dysmorphia*, or an excessive preoccupation with perceived flaws in appearance. Researchers suggest that this behavior is directly associated with societal pressure, primarily for women to live up to the standards of beauty set by a culture obsessed with being thin. Body manipulation also symbolizes the value of women and girls in society, [p. 84 ↓] which affects self-esteem and the mental and physical health of women.

Eating disorders affect primarily young women. According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD), the age of the onset of eating disorders is getting younger; age 11 to 17 is identified as the time of increased vulnerability. For adults, the approximate ratio of eating disorders among men to women is 1:10. About 20 to 30 percent of younger anorexics are male. Up to 20 percent of individuals with serious eating disorders die as a result of the disorder, as a result of complications associated with heart problems and chemical imbalances, and suicide.

Diet Industries and Cosmetic Surgery

Societal pressures to be thin have increased the demand for products and services in the weight control industries. These industries range from diet, fitness, and supplements to cosmetic and bariatric (weight loss) surgery. It is estimated that weight control

products and services generate \$50 to \$100 billion per year. Women are a major target for marketing by weight control industries. According to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, in 2006, women accounted for 92 percent of all cosmetic procedures. Since 1997, surgical procedures (e.g., liposuction, breast augmentation, breast reduction) have increased 123 percent, while nonsurgical procedures (e.g., Botox injection, microdermabrasion, laser hair removal) increased 749 percent.

Surgical procedures have increased as a method of managing weight. One third of American adults are classified as *obese* based on a body mass index of 30 or higher. A study from the University of Michigan Health System found that between 1996 and 2002, the rate of bariatric surgeries performed in the United States increased sevenfold. Women make up 80 percent of all cases. Bariatric surgery comes with severe health risks. Researchers at the University of Washington report that the death rate is 1 in 50 within 30 days after a gastric bypass surgery. However, researchers have also found that the long-term risk of death due to weight-related health conditions is significantly lower among those who had the surgery compared with obese persons who did not. The National Institutes of Health reports that U.S. spending for weight-related conditions and their associated economic losses is at minimum \$117 billion per year. Weight-related health conditions include heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, and sleep apnea.

Intersection of Race, Ethnicity, Sexual Orientation, and Gender

The intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual orientation also plays a role in how individuals experience their bodies. Body dissatisfaction is often attributed to societal standards of thinness and an ideal body type that privileges fair skin, light hair, and other European-descended features. Mainstream Western media imagery tends to homogenize female beauty, which becomes the ideal against which women measure and discipline their bodies. Women of color are significantly impacted by this. While their representation in beauty and fashion magazines is increasing, such publications often reinforce prevailing stereotypes of lighter skin and European-descended features.

Research suggests that sociocultural influences, environmental stress, and the process of acculturation impact the development of eating disorders for women of color. Black women and Latinas are on average heavier than white women. While white women and women of higher socioeconomic status tend to suffer from eating disorders at a higher rate, these rates are increasing for women of color. Women of color who are most vulnerable to eating-disordered behavior include those who have been separated from their primary cultural groups for a significant period of time; women who have internalized the dominant, Eurocentric cultural perception of beauty; and those acclimating to a different culture. According to ANAD, eating disorders in the United States appear to be as common among Hispanic as among Caucasian women. Black women are more prone to bulimia nervosa and abuse of laxatives.

Women of color tend to frame the discussion around body image in terms of *body ethics*, a set of values and beliefs regarding care and presentation of the body (as opposed to *body aesthetics ideals*). These include cultural values regarding body care and presentation and personal and political commitments. Women of color also develop strategies of resistance for identifying affirming images of themselves and fostering positive self-image. Scholars acknowledge the importance of culture and ethnicity in shaping how women develop positive ways of experiencing their bodies through cultural norms and practices.

[p. 85 ↓] A central theme in multiracial feminist perspectives, including Black feminism, womanism, and Chicana feminism, is the internalization of body image ideals for women of color. The politics of cultural representation as racialized and resistance through cultural affirmation is evidenced in the activism and discourse of feminist women of color of the late 20th century.

Men and Masculinity

While body image and associated stigmas are commonly linked to women, the pressure to achieve a particular body ideal for men has significantly increased in recent decades. The ideal for men is a muscular body type, or the *mesomorphic ideal*, associated with physical strength, power, and dominance. Images of this ideal permeate sports culture as well as film, television, and men's magazines. Men are pressured to build physical

prowess as a measure of success, power, dominance, and an ability to protect women. In the past 25 years, the average *Playgirl* magazine centerfold man has decreased in body fat by approximately 12 pounds, while putting on approximately 27 pounds of muscle. Action figures, like “GI Joe,” represent this increase in body mass for men. Since 1960, GI Joe has increased in chest size by 10 inches, and his biceps have increased by 3 inches.

Some researchers suggest that increased rates of women in the workforce have amplified the pressure for men to be more physically attractive, since women have a larger dating pool. Changing power dynamics among men and women in society compel men to exert power and dominance through the increase of their physical form.

Male body dissatisfaction has increased as the prevalence of the mesomorphic ideal has increased. Eating-disordered behaviors for men begin as a means of promoting positive health. These behaviors often turn excessive due to an increased perception of competitiveness among men to be more muscular.

Health risks for men include depression, low self-esteem, and excessive weight lifting, as well as those associated with the consumption of performance-enhancing supplements, such as creatine and anabolic steroids. Bulimia nervosa is also an increasingly common form of eating disorder for men. In 2007, researchers at the Harvard University Medical School report that men make up 25 percent of all adults with eating disorders. According to Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders, Inc., men are less likely to seek treatment for eating disorders because they are commonly understood as a women's problem.

Gay men face an increased level of pressure to conform to the mesomorphic ideal. Minority stress factors such as internalized homophobia, expected stigma for being gay, and experiences of physical attack are associated with increased body image dissatisfaction and masculine body ideal distress for gay men. In 2007, researchers at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health found that the risk for eating-disordered behavior among gay and bisexual men is 3 times greater than for heterosexual men. The study also found that even with slightly elevated eating disorders among men who were active in gay recreational groups, men who reported having a close connection to the gay community and participated in a range of gay and

bisexual organizations did not have higher rates of eating disorders than men who were not as closely affiliated with the community. Rates of eating disorders among lesbian and bisexual women do not differ significantly from gay and bisexual men.

Conclusion

Coupled with the pressure to conform to beauty ideals is the anxiety of performing normative gender roles. These roles are associated with the requisite thinness and fragility linked to femininity for women and the lean, muscular body type symbolizing masculinity for men. Campaigns to promote healthy body images have increased in popularity in recent years. These campaigns include featuring plus-size women in advertising to encouraging exercise and healthy eating habits, particularly among adolescents. In addition, increased representation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals in popular culture has provided new illustrations of gendered bodies. Bending the rules of gender performance has opened the door for increased representation of different body types and, in turn, for a broader social discussion of gender, sex, sexuality, and difference.

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See also

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