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Body Image: **A Clouded Reality**

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When I think back to when I was a child, I remember not worrying or caring about major issues that now, as an adult, I can't help but worry about. Although I worry, I don't always do what I should to prevent the things I worry about from happening. Further details on this will be presented, as I try to gather what I have learned over the years and apply them to understanding the theories behind my actions.

During my adolescent years, I, as many have, dealt with cancer in many instances. Losing my father at a young age to cancer, and having similar experiences with other close family members, I couldn't grasp the concept of why people got so sick and why they had to suffer. I was so scared that I too would be diagnosed with cancer, and was afraid that every time I became ill or just didn't feel right, I was sure I had cancer. Sounds a bit depressing, I know. It's not that it controlled my life, but the thought was always in the back of my head, haunting me. As I matured, I realized more and more that just because I didn't feel well didn't mean I was going to die. Not only was cancer an issue, but sickness in general. I remember as an adolescent watching the movie *Steel Magnolias* in which a woman

has diabetes and ends up dying due to complications with the disease. I just didn't understand why she died; she seemed so young with so much life left. I swore I would keep my body as healthy as possible, to avoid any chance of ever developing cancer or any other sickness. Here is where my problem begins.

We live in a **materialistic society**. We spend a ridiculous amount of money on clothes, makeup, jewelry, etc. On top of being materialistic, we are obsessed with how we look. We care how other people view us, how we view ourselves, and how we compare to the people we see in magazines, on television, and in movies. In Charles Hurst's book *Living Theory* (2000) which we have been studying, there is a section I found interesting, entitled "The Superficial Self." One sentence sums up what I am about to discuss. It states "Many Americans are willing to go to great lengths to manipulate, reshape, sculpt, and downright torture their bodies in order to present the ideal body to others" (Hurst 100). **Body Image** is a huge part of our society; it can control people's lives and force them to do things to their bodies they wouldn't normally do. Body image can be defined as how individuals view themselves in terms of weight, shape, and size. A few years ago, without even realizing what had happened, I developed an eating disorder. At the time, I wasn't aware of what I was doing to myself, how much weight I had actually lost, and especially what it was doing to my friends and family. What I knew was that I was getting compliments from people saying "you look so good, did you lose weight?" It added fuel to the fire. With every compliment, I kept going. Hurst's discussion of body image is one I can relate to all too well.

Charles Horton Cooley's concept, the **looking-glass self**, explains exactly what happened when I interacted with people. The looking-glass self is the self you imagine and feel yourself to be through your

imaginings of how you appear to others and how they judge you. It can therefore be broken down into three elements: the imagination of how we appear to others; the imagination of their judgment of our appearance; and the self-feeling obtained as a result, such as pride in our appearance, or being ashamed of how we appear. Every time I came in contact with someone, I went over in my head how I thought they saw me. “Do they think I’m fat?” “Are they looking at my body?” are all thoughts that ran through my mind. I constantly thought people were talking about me, good or bad, and I couldn’t go anywhere without believing people were staring at and judging me. I was constantly being told it was just my imagination, but I was convinced otherwise.

Many sociological theories can shed light on what causes eating disorders, and what role society plays in them. A **theory** is a tested/testable description or explanation of **social reality**, and with social reality comes the realization of what exactly our society entails. My theory is that people in capitalist society, especially women, feel constant pressure to look perfect at all times. Open a magazine, turn on the television, and tell me what you see. It’s highly unlikely that a model in a magazine will be a size 14 trying to sell jeans. It’s not “sexy” or “attractive.” Meanwhile, the average sized woman in our society today is a size 12. Shouldn’t they be targeting the average woman instead of throwing abnormally skinny girls in our faces? In the film *Affluenza*, we see just how commercialized our society is. We are drawn to the images we see on television, and we then assume that what we see on television is what we should be. Commercials for diet pills, facial creams, and workout videos flood the airwaves with images of how to create the “ideal” body. But who decides what the “ideal” body type is? Certainly not the advertising companies putting these commercials on television; we’re brainwashed to

believe that the people on television are perfect.

The reasons we place such high expectations on ourselves as to how we should look is because of the way we view celebrities. They are social creations whose lives seem so interesting and exciting, yet seem so distant and different from the average persons. The appeal to their lifestyles may be “the combination of familiarity and extraordinariness that gives that celebrity its ideological power” (Hurst 110). We tend to envy their lives without realizing that the lives we lead are just as great if not better than the ones in which they lead. We rely on them for fashion, entertainment, and gossip; we live vicariously through them.

As time wore on, my priorities began to diminish. I felt that attaining my “perfect” body was more important than school, work, and family. The gym was my second home, and being around my family only made me aggravated and annoyed. I was driven by a **false consciousness** of my gender and human existence; I was forgetting what was really important in life and was turning my back on the things that used to make me happy. At that time, being thin made me happy. What I didn’t realize was how miserable everyone around me was becoming because of my selfishness and false consciousness.

When I was dealing with my eating disorder, I seemed to be practicing a **self-fulfilling prophecy**. A self-fulfilling prophecy is a prediction someone has regarding an issue and by acting it out helps realize that prediction. There were many things in my life I couldn’t control, i.e., losing loved ones, and the one thing I could control was what I ate and how much I ate—yet, I disregarded how it was hurting me. I finally did gain “control” over my life, thinking that only I could control the outcome. I proved to myself that my life was “in control,” and I also proved that I could fit society’s standards of what makes a woman beautiful—her body. I was extremely thin and in con-

trol (or so I thought). I had successfully fulfilled my prophecy in my eyes.

Emile Durkheim broke down culture into two spheres; the **sacred**, which deals with the extraordinary and higher elements of life such as reason, morality, science, conceptualizations, altruism, holiness, and the soul. The other sphere is the **profane**, which includes sensations, body, materials, egoism, and the concrete everyday life (Hurst 148). Durkheim believes that these two spheres are constantly engaged in a conflict with each other. I believe this to be very true, especially in the case of eating disorders. The mind is telling you “this isn’t good for your soul, you need to stop being obsessive about weight,” but the body is telling the mind “you’re fat, you need to lose weight.” Durkheim did not consider the body as part of the sacred level of the two spheres; however, in today’s society the body has gained much more importance as it signifies beauty. Durkheim similarly explains that individuals have **two sides to their nature**. We all possess an egoistic side as well as a social side. The first is embedded in biology; the second derived from society. As these two sides remain in conflict with each other, they continue to intensify. We need the social to restrain our selfishness.

In applying the different sociological theories, we can first attend to the **phenomenological** perspective. Being that I once suffered from an eating disorder, and the phenomenological perspective focuses on the point of view of the person involved rather than from other’s point of view, we can use this perspective to help in better understanding eating disorders from a more hands-on approach. The everyday life a person lives in can affect how they view themselves, their body, and their minds. **Dorothy Smith’s Feminist Standpoint Theory**, grounded in the phenomenological perspective, sheds light on how women are viewed in society. She uses the example of the cosmetic displays in shop-

ping malls and how they “document the underlying pattern, or the underlying social order” (Wallace and Wolf, 288) shaping women’s lives. She explains how the use of pastels and the expression of softness gives the impression that the feminine woman is “yielding, pliant, and compliant” (Wallace and Wolf, 288). Even the smallest thing such as a display in the mall can give the impression of what women are expected to be. Just because pastels may exemplify a certain femininity, it doesn’t mean that all women should now dress in pastels. How is a woman who wears pastels any less feminine than a woman who wears black, blue, or brown? The same goes for body image. Just because skinny women are plastered all over the place, doesn’t mean that a woman who is heavy-set is less feminine than the size two model on the billboard.

In the phenomenological perspective the **commonsense** refers to the **take-for-granted** aspects of everyday our knowledges about the world and ourselves. We all possess commonsense, taking for granted the world of reality which we actually create through are *own* thoughts and actions. However, commonsense is itself conflictual. One commonsense tells us that body image and how we look aren’t as important as other things going on in the world. But we also create another reality and commonsense knowledge that says “what you look like matters immensely, because society will accept you more if you look how they want you to look.” You’re pulled at both ends. You know in your mind what’s more important, but society is pulling you the other way telling you something completely different.

Symbolic interaction plays a significant role in persuading people to act or look a certain way. For example, I am a dancer, and have been for many years. I was never overweight, and always had the same body type as most of my friends. As I matured, and began dancing in a company, I took more notice of my body and found myself

constantly looking at myself in the mirror. My dance friends did this all the time; my other friends didn't. When you interact in dance class, you are watching each other, your bodies, your movements, and your placement. It's not that people are doing it to judge you, it's just how a dance class works. That's why people dance—to have people watch your movements. It's sometimes hard to deal with the fact that, while you're dancing, the only interaction you have with the audience or with the people watching you in your dance class is your body. Your body symbolically represents you and speaks for you to the audience. When you're around people who are constantly concerned with their bodies, you can't help but look at your body and think "OK, what's wrong with *my* body?" The groups which we associate with help influence our views on what we look like. Chances are if there is an individual dressed in all black with piercings everywhere, he or she is going to associate themselves with people who dress similarly. It is highly doubtful they would associate with a group that dressed in khakis, plaid shirts, and sweaters tied around their shoulders. My group of dance friends were all very conscious of their bodies at all times, which in turn caused me to suddenly become very aware of every "fault" my body had.

In watching the film *Billy Elliot*, the stereotypes placed on dancers are obvious and outlandish. Because he is male, and he wants to dance, he is judged as being homosexual, and is laughed at by his peers, and looked down on by his father. The same sort of stereotypes are placed on female dancers, only their stereotypes are placed on their bodies. If you are a dancer, you are expected to be thin. If you want dance to be your career, you *have* to be thin. There have been multiple cases of women in ballet companies such as the Boston Ballet who were told they weren't skinny enough, and ended up dying because they got too thin. The way in which society plac-

es stereotypes on people, as we saw in *Billy Elliot*, can either make or break you. Billy chose to rise above them and reach his goal. Unfortunately, for a woman, those goals can be deadly.

Social status and economic **class** can be a factor in dealing with body image and what the ideal person within these classes should look like. It is suggested that people often tag upper-class individuals with the notion that they should be tall and slim, whereas working-class individuals are deemed heavy and clumsy. Sure, with plenty of money to waste, it's easy to mold your body into what you want it to be. A lot of working-class individuals, however, will empty their bank accounts for one cosmetic surgery, just to live up to the expectations set forth upon them. Many individuals who alter their bodies tend to be suffering from what **Karl Marx** called the **fetishism of commodities**. A commodity, according to Marx, "is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another" (Hurst 107). What makes it a fetish is how the "outside object" controls us, our desires, goals, and aspirations. Body parts, especially ones altered by surgery, have become fetishes. They are viewed as independent objects but are really "manifestations of a set of social relationships in society" (Hurst 107).

Max Weber's outlook on the trend towards increasing **rationalization** in society is one that is taken into account when discussing body image. He looks at rationalization as a process whereby social relations are organized in such a way as to make the most effective decision to increase efficiency, wealth, power, etc. Weber believes we live in an **iron cage** characterized by increasing rationalization and bureaucratization of social relations. No one *wants* to live with an eating disorder. We feel that in order to live up to society's expectations, we *have* to do whatever it takes to mold and shape our body to fit in with society. We all

take on certain **roles** in terms of how we act and look within society. To many, women are expected to take on the role of being the caretaker, of always having to look pretty and put-together. We are expected to know about make-up, hair products/styles, and fashion. A **role conflict** begins when a woman doesn't fit the expected role she is "supposed" to play. A woman who is a size fourteen, or a woman who dresses in baggy clothes with no makeup is deemed unattractive and unable to fit the roles set forth upon them.

In one of the articles I read in *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, Emily Margulies wrote about her experiences with smoking. She said she knew it was bad for her, and at first, she started smoking once in a while, then gradually began smoking all the time. She knew she was killing herself by smoking, but it was an addiction. She thought she looked "cool" by smoking, and felt as though she fit in more. This is exactly how an eating disorder works. It becomes a habit, a way of life. You do it to fit in even though you know it's bad for you. Society tells you this is cool, so you think, "what's the harm?" There was also another article in the same issue of the journal dealing with the same problem of addiction, but here with regards to the drinking habit. If you were to ask someone why they drank, they could say a number of things. "I like how it makes me feel," "because my friends do," and "because it helps me escape" are a few common responses. An eating disorder, mainly bulimia, is like alcoholism. It's addicting, first and foremost, but it can also make you feel great. After you eat, you know you can just get rid of it afterwards. As weird as this may sound, it was a great feeling to rid your stomach of food; it was like a drug. For those few minutes, nothing else in the world mattered. It's the same as being drunk—you don't think about the problems you may have or the pain you may feel—it all goes away. The downside is, like

alcoholism, you are never really completely cured; relapses are not uncommon.

When we watched the movie *The Matrix* there was one particular scene where they are standing on a sidewalk with people dressed exactly the same walking by them. Standing out is one woman in a red dress. This scene grabbed my attention for a few reasons. Within our society, we are constantly trying to be like everyone else. Think about it. If we see someone wearing something that we like, chances are we would go to the store in which that item was sold at and purchase it. Soon that style becomes the new "fad," and everyone is walking around wearing basically the same thing. Individuals within our society have lost their sense of **individuality**; they don't do what makes them happy or what they feel is right; they do what they think will make society happy or what society feels is right. If someone isn't dressed with the latest fashion, we deem them "weird" and look at them as if they're from another planet. It's the same thing with weight. When seeing an overweight person, many quickly shun them away, without getting to know who the person really is. We only see what's on the outside. That's how our society has become. There were or still are other societies where large women are viewed as beautiful and healthy. Today, we see size two models strutting down a runway modeling clothes that *we're* all supposed to wear? Is this real?

Functionalism and **conflict theory** provide macrosociological perspectives on our on body images today. Both are concerned with overall characteristics of social structure and see human behavior as being predictable. In contrast to functionalism which suggests that values motivate human social action, conflict theory suggests that interests motivate human social action. Conflict theorists are more concerned about explanation than functionalists. They are mostly concerned with providing explanations of how certain events are created by the ac-

tions and interests of different groups (classes, status, or power groups) within society as a result of changes in technology, resources, and ideas.

In regards to body image, I would have to take the side of the conflict theorists, because I believe that human beings are motivated by self or group interests. In this society we do things to please ourselves first, then worry about the others around us. Now maybe I'm looking at this pessimistically, but I would tend to disagree with the functionalist idea that humans are motivated by values. Society today lacks value. We are a "quick-fix" society; we'll do what makes us happy at the moment, not taking into account the effects it will have on society or, in a more micro sense, the people surrounding us in our lives. Eating disorders are a perfect example. It's a quick fix, it satisfies the interest of the individual with the eating disorder, and it pushes values to the back burner, for if we took values into account, we would be fully aware of just how bad eating disorders are.

Speaking of conflict theory, we should further look at stratifications based on **gender**. Women are paid less, are considered inferior to men, and have expectations placed on them that far exceed that of a man. I think a main reason why women tend to put so much time and effort into worrying about their bodies is because they think that it's something that men can't control. In their view, men can control the economy or the nation, but they can't control what size a woman is. The fact is men do exert influence on a woman's view of her body, but this does not mean that she *has* to change it for them.

In the film *Erin Brockovich*, we see a woman struggling against all odds and fighting for what she believes in. With all the advances in our society and the degree of progress we've made in technology and science, you would think that the stereotype of women would somehow advance as well. We are expected to look a certain

way and act a certain way. If we dress scantily clad, as Erin did, we aren't taken seriously. So we dress down, and are then considered a "tomboy." In our textbook, *Contemporary Sociological Theory*, Wallace and Wolf state that women are in fact expected to maintain a stricter personal front, whether it be the clothes they wear, the way their hair is styled, or the makeup they are wearing. The sociologist Erving Goffman is quoted as saying "for a woman to appear in public with her costume disarrayed can be taken as a sign of accessibility and looseness of morals" (Wallace and Wolf, 230). The stereotypes placed on women are ridiculous and immature. Not only do we have to prove ourselves as being feminine and beautiful, but we have to prove on a daily basis that we are capable of handling any task that a man can. It's exhausting.

As time wore on and I continued with my eating disorder, I began to realize how miserable I felt about myself. The weight was coming off, but the depression was packing on the pounds. I felt alone, confused, scared, and most of all, angry. I didn't understand why I had to be going through such an awful thing. I was killing my body, and I swore I would never do that. I was taking an Abnormal Psychology class at the time, and one of the topics was none other than eating disorders. I started crying in class and walked out. I finally began to realize why I was doing this to myself. I wasn't doing it because I wanted to; I was doing it because I thought if I did, I would be accepted by society even more than I already had been before the eating disorder began.

According to the sociologist George H. Mead we wouldn't have a **sense of self** without society. I believe this to be true and false at the same time. We need things like social interaction and language to help us grow into a human being who knows how to communicate with the world around them. Without language, we wouldn't have a sense of self. We need to communicate

with people on a daily basis, whether it is at work, at home, or at school; everyone we come in contact with helps us in some way to grow as a person. However, society does have negative effects on individuals as well. My eating disorder did come about for reasons other than society. I withheld a lot of emotions over the years I had never realized existed. Society, however, can be a mean force that pulls you down and holds you there until you can't take it anymore. An eating disorder is something that I will never forget, and will always run the risk of developing it again. It's a challenge and a struggle to get over such a socially conditioned disease. We can't escape it, we can't run from it, and we certainly can't get rid of it.

To link my fear of sickness and my eating disorder, you have to look at the psychological as well as the social aspect of it. It's as if there is another self living in your body, telling you what to eat, what not to eat, how you look, and how you feel. You can't think for yourself. For a long time I was damaging my body. There are people all over the world, of all different ages, all different shapes and size, who develop horrible diseases everyday and have no control over the outcome. I was selfishly killing my body when I should have been appreciating the fact that I had a healthy body before all this began. Society tells you skinny is beautiful, yet when people find out someone has an eating disorder, they automatically **stigmatize** that person as pathetic or an attention-seeker. Where is the fairness? If people would stop and appreciate themselves for the real persons they are, and our society wasn't so highly based on looks, we could eliminate many of the issues surrounding body image. There are more important things to worry about in life than what size your jeans are or how much you weigh.

In life, we all take part in **dramaturgy**. According to Erving Goffman, we all play different roles in our everyday lives, as an

actor would in a play. When I look at my eating disorder and how it affected me in regards to society, I notice that I took on a front-stage/back-stage attitude. The **front-stage** is what everyone you come in contact with sees, i.e., what the audience sees when they watch a play. The **backstage** is what happens in the background, like when undergoing a costume change or someone rehearsing lines, involving emotions and behavior that are not meant to be seen by others. In my front-stage persona I was confident, skinny, and beautiful. In my backstage persona, however, I was scared, confused, alone, and miserable. As Goffman describes the backstage region, we can "drop our front, forego speaking lines, and step out of character" (Wallace and Wolf, 231). Basically, we can be ourselves when we are backstage. We put on different acts as to what we think society expects of us. I was skinny, so I in turn *must* be happy. Not the case at all. We rarely get a chance to be our real selves. We are constantly putting on a front, acting a certain way, looking a certain way. A majority of the population, more likely than not, do not even know who they really are.

We seem to have two images of ourselves, one for the outside and one for the inside, sort of the like the backstage/front-stage personas. According to Thomas Cash quoted, "Beauty is no guarantee of a favorable body image, nor is homeliness a decree for a negative body image" (Hurst 102). We know that during the process of socialization, we learn to see ourselves as other people see us and learn to look at ourselves on the basis of their attitudes toward us. The body is the most visible aspect of ourselves, especially for women in society today. In other words, how a woman presents herself physically reflects on her own self-image.

With eating disorders, it's like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, you feel you are being more accepted by becoming thinner; on the other hand, people tend to react to eating disorders as if it were some-

thing to be ashamed of. There is a sense of **discrimination** toward people suffering from an eating disorder; they are judged on their sickness and labels are placed upon them. They accuse individuals with eating disorders as attention-seekers, or judge them as if they were cursed with the plague. It seems that everyone today, in one way or another, is trying to reform their body. Exercise, dieting, and surgery are the three main ways in which we try to alter our bodies into the “ideal” body type. Weight Watcher’s meetings and aerobics classes are a chance for people with similar goals to get together. I have a friend who is a part of the Weight Watcher’s program, and it seems as though the people within the group are very supportive and want to help each other reach their goals in a healthy manner.

Objectivation seems to have some truth to our society. We “apprehend everyday life as an ordered, prearranged reality that imposes itself upon but is seemingly independent of human beings” (Wallace and Wolf, 279). In regards to our society today, we don’t live life as if it were a blessing, as if it was a reality created by us for our good. We look at it as just there, with things in it to fill up our time, our money, and our emotions. We have detached ourselves emotionally from the things in life that make us happy.

I think body image has become a **social dilemma** in our society. Eating disorders are too common among women, and I put 100% of the blame on society. But how did our society become so clouded that we actually believe that someone who looks as though they haven’t eaten in months is beautiful? In the past, women like Marilyn Monroe were considered beautiful, and being full-figured was praised. I would give anything to live in a society where that was the case, as I’m sure many women today do. We know what eating disorders do to the body, so why do we continue to torture our bodies? We as a society need to take a

step back and look at what we have become: A materialistic, image-obsessed society that praises beauty more than it praises knowledge, love, and life. We are made up of individuals all with a false consciousness of what we really want.

I think our society has a clouded image of what is beautiful. Women all over the world are killing themselves to conform their bodies to society’s standards. Instead of praising women for being healthy, we criticize them and place pressure on them to be like what they see on television, in films, or on the runways. Eating disorders are growing problems which many seem to brush aside, assuming those afflicted by the problem will take care of themselves. The only way to change the growing rate of eating disorders is to change the way our society functions as a whole.

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