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## Obsessed with Impression Management: A Critical Sociology of Body Image in Capitalist Society

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## *Obsessed with Impression*

### *Management:*

## **A Critical Sociology of Body Image in Capitalist Society**

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I can not tell you how many times in my life I have said “if only I were thin.” I honestly feel that life would be much easier for me if I were thin. The key word is “easier.” I think that thin and beautiful people reap the majority of the benefits in this society and I, of course, am not one of them.

I have felt this way for as long as I can remember and I really believe it to be true. My weight is something that has always been an issue for me. I can not really understand why I don't lose weight. I know I can do it, like a person who knows she can ace a test if only she studies for it. That is how I feel. I know I can do it. I know it is all in my mind and seems to be just an issue of will power but I can't seem to go down to the weight I desire. Why?

Sometimes I think that it is genetics, but then I look at my sisters. Sometimes I think that it is the demand society puts on me to lose weight so I feel that I have to—that the only reasons I even feel like I need to lose weight is because that is what has been thrown at me in the mass media all of my life. From television, to magazines, to

my home life, weight has been a constant underlying factor in my life and it just never goes away.

From the age of five years old and on I have had a weight problem. One of my main memories of my childhood is my grandmother placing food strategically out of my reach at the dinner table so that I would not overeat. My entire childhood and life thus far has been based on looks. This is true for both the girls and the boys in my family. This is something that is very important to everyone and they pride themselves on our being a good-looking family. Not to brag, but I do have a very good-looking family and none of them is overweight except for me.

It all started with my grandmother. Her mother had to be institutionalized in a mental institute and her father just could not take care of three children on his own. He put them into an orphanage. This is where my grandmother stayed until she was eighteen years old. From that point on she was on her own and she believes that her looks got her what she needed in life and if she did not have them she would not have been able to survive.

That frame of mind has traveled down the generations in my family—from my mother and aunt and now on to my cousins, sisters, and myself. **Sociobiology** explores how the body and physical experiences are of central importance to the individual and social life, while the **Sociology of the Body** explores how our attitudes towards our bodies are socially constructed (Wallace and Wolf, 369). My whole life can be explored using these notions. I am not only an outcast in society because of my weight, but I am the only one like this in my family as well. My whole life has been an emphasis on the body and physical experiences. I can clearly remember walking out of the door at twelve years old and my mother saying to me “put some lipstick on for goodness's sake, you're going out.” In most families, someone that age would not

be allowed to wear makeup, but I was taught at a very early age that if you go out of the house, you should have makeup on your face.

This brings me to **Phenomenology**. This is a sociological perspective that begins with the individual and his/her own conscious experience and tries to avoid the prior assumptions and prejudices. It really asks us to question our way of looking at and being in the world. This perspective asks us to assume the role of a stranger by “putting ourselves in other peoples shoes” (Wallace and Wolf, 276). There are three major concepts of phenomenology and all these aspects support the notion that reality is socially constructed. The first is **externalization**. This is where individuals, by their own activity, create their social worlds. The second is **objectivation**. This is the process by which the person apprehends life as an ordered or prearranged reality. The third is **internalization**. This implies that this same social world will, through the processes of socialization, acquire the status of reality within the consciousness of the individual.

These concepts really apply to my problem. You will almost never see my grandmother or mother in public without any makeup on; they *externalized* this pattern of behavior while we as children grew up. It has simply turned into an *objectivated* common sense norm for women in my family to put makeup on and make sure we look good before leaving the house and going out in public. All my life I have *internalized* the notion that it is important to look good and be thin; this has become a part me and I wouldn't feel comfortable any other way.

These three aspects of phenomenology are Berger and Luckmann's three key concepts of the **Social Construction of Reality**. This is basically the notion that social life is created. Once constructed, social reality then in turn influences how we view ourselves. It has to do with habituation and doing something over and over again until

you subjectively internalize the constructed reality. This is what I have done or should I say what my family has done to me. I stress and I stress over how to achieve the ideal body or image. If I read in a magazine that a hairstyle is out, you will never see my hair like that again. If the latest makeup fad is heavy on the eyes and light on the lips, that is how my makeup will be. I feel like I have socially and personally created my own reality within the one that has been created for me by my family.

The concept of social construction of reality makes me think of the movie *The Matrix*. In this movie, it is brought to the attention of the character Neo that the reality that he is living in is not actually the reality at all. It is all just a constructed computer program. This is how I feel. Do I feel that I am fat because society has constructed my body image to portray a fat person? Is it because today's magazines and television programming promote advertisements encouraging women to meet impossible personal standards? The capitalist society plays a crucial role in people's lives and how they view their bodies and whether or not they have a good body image of themselves. This is also shown through today's society in terms of consumerism. The movie *Affluenza* explores the materialistic society we live in and how it effects us. The way products are marketed for the public give people the notion that they need to look and be a certain way in order to fit into society. We need to have a certain type of body so that we can buy what we see in the magazines and on television, so that we can fit in the consumer society that we live in. I am not really sure but I think that if I was living in a different culture or a different time period I would not be considered fat and I would not look at myself as fat.

This reminds me of the piece “Theoretical Reflections on Peer Judgments” (2003), by M. Goltry. The author writes about how in high school she was not following the so-

cially constructed norms of what women were meant to look like. She was not what society would consider “beautiful.” She had glasses and was overweight and was not society’s ideal-looking woman. That is how I feel about myself. I feel that my body is going against the norm even though my mind does not want to. So in order to deal with this problem, as Goltry tried to do when faced with negative peer judgments, I find that I should maintain **group solidarity**. I feel the need to follow the groups or the social norms to reap the social benefits. I feel that **Labeling** plays a big part in this. If I choose to have friends that are labeled as very thin and boyfriends that only have slim bodies (which I often do), I feel that by association with the group I will also be labelled thin and slim. If I hang out with only thin people then perhaps I will look thinner and more appealing as well. But the contrary may be true as far as my **looking glass self** image is concerned. If the people I choose to interact with are very much set on society’s standards then I will most likely have a worse self image of myself than if I were to surround myself with very positive, socially open people who do not care about meeting impossible standards regarding weight and looks. In “Why I Smoke: Sociology if a Deadly Habit” (2003) the author, Emily Margulies, tries to explain how she developed her smoking habit as a result of participating in a group life that reinforced her habit. My group life that surrounds me consists of two sisters, both under five foot four and weighing less than one hundred twenty pounds each. My groups of friends are also approximately this size. This is the group that I surround myself with and this is what I compare myself with everyday.

Charles Cooley’s notion of the looking glass self applies perfectly to me. It states that the “self that you understand is a result of the information reflected back at you in the judgment of others with whom you interact” (Wallace and Wolf, 195). More pre-

cisely, Cooley identifies three steps of the process: “the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-healing, such as pride or mortification” (Wallace and Wolf, 195). I do tend to judge myself based on how I interpret the reaction of the others around me. I know whether I look good or bad based on my imagination of the reaction I get from people when I go out. From the movie “Twelve Angry Men” I have learned that people are very quick to come to a decision but are not as quick to change that opinion. Jury members were judging the person on trial before they even put the whole story together. Luckily the man had someone on his side to point out the holes in the story and the things they missed to see. They now had something to reflect on instead of just their first impression. Most people do not have a person on their side to disprove and resist public prejudice. I often have only my appearance to make the first impression on a person. I do not have someone standing with me explaining to people that I am a great person with a great personality and someone they should get to know. The accused man in the movie did have someone to fight for him. Someone to show the other side of the story and make people realize that things are not always the way you see them.

I am obsessed with **Impression Management**. We want to act or do things in a certain way in order to give people a certain impression about us. Maybe that is why I chose to hang out with a majority of thin people. That is the impression I want people to get. I want them to see that even though I am on the bigger side, I am still just like the thin people everyone is used to seeing—that I am just as good.

Due to **gender socialization**, I think that it is harder for a woman to be socialized into the norms of society than it is for a man. I mean, look at the movies we see. A man does not have to be good looking to

make it and have everything he wants—take Danny Devito as an example. But the number of women who are bigger or really just not that attractive is much smaller in show business. I think **Exchange Theory** explains much of this pattern in show business. Exchange theory suggests that human behavior is based on perceived punishments and rewards expected in performing an act. This, to me, is how the social system that we live in works. For example, if you go to a bar and look good, guys will buy you a drink—that is a reward because you do not have to spend your own money. There have even been studies done that two people with equal qualification will apply for the same job and the good looking one will get the job—that is a reward. That is what it seems our society is based on, looks. Consider what Dorothy E. Smith states in her **feminist standpoint theory**, which explores everyday and everynight worlds of individuals situated in subordinate positions, particularly of women. If women are put in lower positions because of their gender anyway, they may as well feel that looking good can help her upward mobility. She needs her looks to get the rewards society has to offer. It is just like my grandmother, believing that she needed her looks to get by in life and then passing this idea down to her family.

At one point in his essay “Defying the Sweatshop, Sociologically Speaking” (2002), Steve Sacco wonders if his views towards taking a stand on sweatshop labor in contrast to his peers could possibly be a result of biological factors. He finds it implausible, and I feel the same. I do not feel that my issues have to do with biology at all. Instead, like Sacco, I feel like it all stems from the social factors that I have been surrounded with since birth. I seem to always want to impress the **generalized other**. I try to represent myself in the way that will get the most desired response from society.

Unfortunately, I think that my family really caused trouble in the way of **social-**

**ization**. I have been taught or socialized since a young child to look good and make a good impression on the people around me. Sometimes, I really do not want to care. Sometimes, I just want to lay back and like me for who I am and not have to worry about the impression I am making on other people around me. There is not a mirror or a window that I walk by that I do not look in. There is not a day that goes by that I look at another woman and think to myself, “I wish I had a body like hers.”

**Rational Choice theories** state that people will base their individual actions on what they think will be the most effective way to achieve their goals. I just feel that society (which includes ourselves) has made it such that we have to be one step ahead of the next person. We have to have better hair, eyes, nose, and body in order to survive in this society that we have created for ourselves. Looks mean a lot of things to people and until there is some radical social change, a lot of young women are going to feel just as inadequate and unappealing as I do at times. I wish my family had emphasized something other than looks and body type. I wish my family had pushed education or kindness instead of this. Then again, maybe they are just as much victims of the social reality that we live in as I am.

Why are we victims of the social reality that we live in? Why do we strive so hard to find social acceptance in trivial things such as looks? Why does something like looks weigh so heavily in our lives? These questions relate to a much bigger social problem. We have created a society obsessed with looks and appearance. We have done this through media outlets such as magazines and television, all of which reflect the interests of big corporations and the type of hold the corporate world has on the individual and society as a whole.

As I stated earlier in this essay, social exchange is often seen as involving taking actions to reap rewards and/or benefits. All that we are bombarded with are pictures in

advertising that tells us how we should look, dress, and act. This has created a society of women who strive to achieve a body type that may be impossible in order to receive these rewards. This is because we see these beautiful women in magazines and want to live the life that they seem to live. We also want to get rewarded with the life of luxury because of our looks. Unfortunately, this is not as easy as it sounds. "Female models are becoming thinner at a time when women are becoming heavier, and the gap between the ideal body shape and the reality is wider than ever. There is a need for more realistic body shapes to be shown on television and in fashion magazines" (Maclean's, 2000:2). So why are we striving for this level of impossibility? It is because we live in a society driven by profit motif, our images (among others) exploited by those who control the relevant productive resources.

Think about it. The companies that want us to buy their clothing advertise in all of the magazines and on the television shows that are most commonly watched or read. They each help each other without giving an inkling of thought to the consumer and how what they are advertising is affecting their lives. The ads that run for a store like the Express show young pretty women who are thin and look happy and in the prime of their lives. This leads people to go out and buy the clothing that is shown. But what happens if someone can not fit into that type of clothing. Then they are going to go out and buy some diet pills at a store like GNC that is even advertised in the same issue of *Cosmopolitan* that just made the girl want that new skirt. All of the companies are intertwined somehow or another and it is all about profit, not consumers well being.

The movie *The Big One* by Michael Moore illustrates how corporations and corporate decisions shape and influence our society. The corporations are what really matter, not the workers who keep the

plants alive by producing the goods, or the consumers whose needs are created by same or other corporations to buy those products. Only the big corporations are what matter. This is why all of the advertising is geared to making you want the unachievable because it keeps us striving and buying until we finally reap the social benefits. But the only ones who reap the benefits are the big corporations who do not really care if we reach these goals. They do not care if they give young girls eating disorders as long as the products are being sold.

**Conflict theories** see power and struggle for power as being central to social life. Max Weber and Karl Marx both "...viewed different groups competing for different social rewards, they agreed that society was fundamentally unstable, and that the operative force behind change was the conflict which inevitably arose between various social groups in competition for social changes" (Farganis 219). It is all about a society controlled by companies, a society in which people's worth is based on their **socioeconomic status**. These magazine ads that we see tell us that in order to be the best we have to dress up and be like those portrayed in the ads. These magazine and television ads are just depicting an image and yet social happiness and acceptance is based almost entirely around them.

In *Billy Elliot* the little boy, Billy, wants to take dance classes instead of the boxing classes his father urges him to take. This is not acceptable for the family of this young boy. This is because he would be socialized into a different role than what people in his community are used to. Society has put pressures on him to be, look, and act in a certain way. That is what magazine and big corporations tell us to do. They say that we should look and be a certain way and if we do not, then we are not up to society's standards. So how does this affect the people of different **social classes**?

Those of **lower class** standing may not

have the means to buy the things that they see in magazines and on television. This could mean that they have an even lower self-esteem because they can not portray themselves in the socially acceptable way that is suggested in the ads. Those in the **middle class** may have the means to achieve a certain ideal that is portrayed in the media but their means are even more aggressively targeted by the corporations who seek to make a profit out of their impression management needs. Those in the **upper class** can certainly afford to be like the girls portrayed in the magazines. They can afford to buy the clothing, makeup, and diet pills to make them socially acceptable and they do not have to worry about the economic recourse. As a matter of fact, the images that are portrayed in the magazines are actually often the **ideas of the ruling class**. These are the dominant ideas that are present in society. So does this mean that the upper class women have a better body image because they themselves have created this image? I would argue that the mainstream concepts and realities that women face in society today are often hard to achieve, even for those in the upper class. In fact, women in the upper class are even more aggressively sought as advertising targets.

“The growth of feminism is an important reason for sociologists’ growing interest in the body” (Wallace and Wolf, pg. 380). Gender is an important issue when talking about ideal body image in a capitalist society. Women are the highest portions of consumers in this country and the advertisements are really geared toward them. The way the media fluctuates decade after decade with changes in body ideals, plastic surgery seems to be a no-brainer of a solution to the potential problems women face. Breast augmentation and liposuction advertisements grace the pages of magazines. They encourage young girls that “thin is in” and that in order to be happy they must look like the girls that grace the pages of the

magazines. This just fuels the consumer society and destroys people’s images of themselves.

There are some stores that cater to the not socially ideal looking individual. These stores’ goals are to tell the public that “beauty is more than fitting into a size four pant” (Maclean’s, 2002:2). This is not however the mainstream reality. On the whole, the portrayals of body image in the consumer society really are not true or realistic. “It is more likely for someone to fully recover from cancer than it is for an obese person to lose a significant amount of weight and maintain it for five years” (Saltzberg & Chrisler 150). If this is the case, it is really unbelievable that the magazines would gear so much of their advertising around body image and achieving a certain look.

**Emile Durkheim** inspired **Functionalism**. He supported and viewed society as an entity in and of itself. “Society is external to us in that we feel its pressures to conform, but it is also internal to us in that it forms the collective moral conscience” (Farganis 55). Basically, collective human acts are what create social norms and this is reflected in everything from morals and behavior to looks and body ideals. But we were not all born with the thought that we have to be thin so we can fit into the society that we live in. Some people constructed this external “**social facts**,” which have already been externalized and objectivated in society and we then internalize them to make them a part of us.

Durkheim distinguishes two basic forms of social organization, **mechanical solidarity** and **organic solidarity**. People with basically similar social roles characterize mechanical solidarity. These people have a tendency to share many things and have a common culture. They have little specialization or division of labor. These people who share a common culture and share many of the same things will strive to achieve the image that is portrayed in the

media of women. It is a common cultural look and this may help gain them acceptance. The organic solidarity is a little bit different. It refers more to the modern society. There is a difference in the division of labor and an abundance of specialization, making people not conform to the norms as much. The people in organic solidarity with one another are also dependent on one another, though allowed to be more individual when it comes to how they want to look instead of portraying what is shown to society. This perhaps explains why the obsession with individual looks and impression management is so widespread in a modern society.

Once these obsessive behaviors become **social facts**, existing independently from a given individual act, they provoke conformity to the social norms. "If I do not submit to the conventions of society, if in my dress I do not conform to the customs observed in my country and in my class, the ridicule I provoke, the social isolation in which I am kept, produce, although in an attenuated form, the same effects as a punishment in the strict sense of the word" (Farganis 59-60). This is the fear of most people in modern life. If they do not conform to the body ideals set by society then they are going to be punished by society. They will not be able to achieve all that they can regardless of the talents that they hold. They have learned that we live in a society based on looks just as my family made me realize a long time ago.

**Robert Merton's** concepts of **manifest** and **latent functions** are also relevant to the issue of socially approved body image. Manifest functions, according to Merton (Wallace and Wolf, 52-53), are the consequences that people easily observe and expect when performing an act. The manifest functions of beauty is to supposedly please our senses. The good looks is assumed to play such a manifest function in society. The latent functions are those that are not intended or recognized. The costly ability

to maintain and achieve good looks certainly plays the latent functions of adding to corporate profits and disenfranchising those who cannot afford the means. In this society we expect that the better-looking woman is going to get the job over the fat and ugly one. That she will reap the social benefits while the girl who is not socially approved will not receive the benefits. I don't think that society actually planned on penalizing those who did not look socially ideal. I think that this is just what things have evolved to in society and that this is just one of the outcomes of it.

The issues with impression management that we have in society today are perpetuated through the media and how it portrays body image. Just as my family affected me, society and media are influenced by the consumer/capitalist society. It is made so that we all have a certain role to play and a certain way to look and if we do not fit into that then we do not get as far in the social world as one who may be ideal in the looks department. They reap the social rewards that society has to offer. Big corporations feed on this and make the public even more needy of the ideal body image by throwing it in their faces everyday on the television and the magazines.

Writer Allen Ginsberg once said; "Whoever controls the media—the images—controls the culture" (Maclean's 1). This is a very true statement. Society is based on looks and the capitalist society that we live in does not promote realistic beauty ideals or cater to the average woman. We all have issues with our bodies whether it comes from being bombarded with these wafer thin images portrayed in magazines or from the family we were raised in. At both micro and macro social levels, obsession with body image is a social dilemma we will all face in our lifetime.

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