

Women's Attitudes towards Their Bodies: Influential Tendencies in Modern Western Culture

Elena Stankovskaya

46 b Volgogradskyi prospect, office 102, 109316, Moscow, Russia

stankovskaya@hse.ru

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Abstract. A woman's body becomes a site of alarming attention and anxiety in modern Western culture. The preoccupation with the body seriously affects women's psychological well-being and self-esteem, health and health related behaviours, relationships with others, and career. This article focuses on the social influences on body perception and women's individual lives. It reveals the complexity of a human body and women's personal activity addressed to their bodies, and contains the results of qualitative hermeneutical research of influential bodily sociocultural tendencies and women's attitudes towards their bodies in modern Western culture.

1. Introduction

In modern world body dissatisfaction becomes commonplace. It is so widespread that Rodin and her colleagues suggested a term 'normative discontent' to describe nearly epidemic popularity of concern for the body [1], and Orbach stated 'body destabilization' as one of the most significant features of bodies in our time [2]. The preoccupation with the body seriously affects an individual life: it strongly influences psychological well-being and self-esteem, health and health related behaviours, relationships with others, and even career.

Analysis of previous studies in the field has shown three important characteristics of them. In the first place, although both men and women suffer from body dissatisfaction, many surveys demonstrate that women are more vulnerable in this aspect [3]. Secondly, many researchers emphasize the role of social environment in body dissatisfaction development [2, 4, 5, 6]. In the third place, despite the increasing interest to the problem, a lot of questions are still to be answered. For example, what are the most influential body related tendencies in modern society? How a person does assume sociocultural patterns? Why body image is so important for women? How are interrelated body satisfaction and general self-esteem?

Therefore, to provide better understanding of the point we decided to investigate *the complexity of a human body, women's personal activity addressed to their bodies and influential bodily sociocultural tendencies in modern Western culture*. Such examination, we believed, might extend knowledge of women's personalities and individual lives, reveal meanings and potentials of challenges faced by modern women and considerably contribute to the psychology of the body.

2. The complexity of human body

We are used to think about a human body as a physiological mechanism or as an object to be possessed, worked with and worked on. But this perspective is limited and does not correspond to our everyday experience. In psychology we have to develop more complex and comprehensive understanding of human body, understanding which is adequate to personal reality.

What constitutes a human body? How do we perceive our own bodies? In the personality psychology we are interested, first of all, in a *living, experienced body*. From that phenomenological point of view, we may distinguish between three components of human body: *physiological, psychological, and cultural*.

Objective body abilities, limitations, qualities, physiological processes (respiration, digestion, growth, ageing, etc.), vitality, physiological needs are attributed to a physiological component or, in Orbach's terms, 'body as a body' [2]. By distinguishing this component we want to emphasize biological regularities and limitations operating in our lives, that 'not only our bodies were given to us but we were given, possessed by our bodies as well' [7].

Psychological component includes subjective perception and personal activity addressed to one's body, body image, attitude to one's body, individual body history shaped by significant body events, impact of the emotional state on body systems, etc. On the one hand, this component corresponds to the fact that we cannot perceive our bodies directly, that our perception is always mediated by consciousness, emotions and motivation. On the other hand, it refers to the connection between our psychological well-being and physiological health.

The third component, cultural, is formed by social body practices and ideals, gender patterns, body values and meanings associated with a specific period, group, religion, etc. 'Our bodily codes and behaviours ... show us that our taken-for-granted body is neither natural nor pure but a body that is inscribed and formed by the accretion of myriad small specific cultural practices' [2]. Sociocultural bodily practices and body discourses were deeply analyzed by French post-modernists such as Barthes, Foucault [8], Deleuze and Guattari, etc.

Of course, this differentiation is conditional. In real life we deal with complex processes, with the *physiological-psychological-cultural unity of the body*. For instance, the way one feels embraces simultaneously the objective state of the body, subjective perception and prognosis of its change, previous body experience, cultural meaning of it, etc. However, we found helpful to recognize body complexity and to distinguish different body 'dimensions'.

Another useful way of thinking about a body is to discern between an *inner body* and an *external body*[9]. According to Bakhtin, inner body is constituted by the flow of sensations, needs and desires consolidated by inner center. It is the basis of perception of one's body and refers to the 'I-for-myself' psyche component. External body, or appearance, includes expressive body features and is formed by interactions with others and their reactions on one's look ('I-for-the-other' psyche component).

Thus, human body can be considered as a complex physiological-psychological-cultural phenomenon, the unity of inner body and appearance.

3. Woman's attitude towards her body as personal activity

Our study was based on the concept '*attitude*' developed by Russian psychologists Rubinshtein[10], Abulkhanova [11], Starovoytenko [12]. Since we use specific, non-traditional understanding of the concept, brief explanations for the term should be given.

The concept '*attitude*' reflects the *complex activity initiated by Ego ("I") and addressed to an object recognized as a subjective value*. The term emphasizes personal selectivity, personal ability to transform environmental effects, human freedom and creativity. Particularly, that means that by the use of attitudes we are not only forced, compulsory connected to the world, we intentionally join with the world and become active creators of our inner worlds and individual lives. Another important feature of it is that an attitude unites *ideal* and *practical* components and is realized by means of different higher mental functions.

Deep insights on the concept were presented by Starovoytenko [12]. Applying her ideas to women's self-perception of their bodies, we may suggest the following understanding of *awoman's attitude towards her body*.

This attitude can be considered as an element of a general woman's attitude to herself. A woman's attitude towards her body may be defined as a personal connection with the body

mediated by self-conscious and self-oriented practices; continuous Ego (“I”) activity in distinguishing and joining with the body. The core of the attitude is formed by subjectively perceived value, significance of the body. Subjective significance marks the meaning of the body, its importance for individual life, and engenders various forms of personal activity: emotional, motivational, cognitive, behavioural, perceptual, etc. In addition, this attitude is the *unity of individual, social and cultural processes*. A woman appropriates sociocultural body patterns and accumulated in culture attitudes to a body, transforms them into her individual reality by developing her personal attitude. Thus, the concept ‘a woman’s attitude towards her body’ is extremely helpful when we want to moderate social influences and to help a woman to achieve authentic embodiment.

Development of the attitudes becomes especially important task in our time. Since neither instincts nor social rules and traditions determine human behaviour in modern Western culture, people experience serious difficulties in making life decisions and adopting a personal identity. In this connection, personal attitudes may be considered as useful guidelines in the modern unstable world. In particular, a mature woman’s attitude towards her body may become a helpful ‘psychological tool’. It may support women’s resistance to harmful sociocultural body patterns and obtaining ‘highlights’ of modern bodily culture and lead her to the authentic living.

Thereby, the concept ‘woman’s attitude towards her body’ describes a form of personal activity addressed to the body as a subjective value, and is a helpful tool in studying both women’s phenomenological reality and body sociocultural patterns’ appropriation.

4. Women’s attitudes towards their bodies: modern tendencies in Western culture

Method. To explore modern variations of women’s attitudes towards their bodies and their key tendencies we applied *hermeneutical method*. As sources were used texts on the personality psychology, the psychology of the body, gender studies, philosophy, culturology, history, clinical psychology, body-oriented psychotherapy, and fiction (twenty six sources). The hermeneutical model consisted of the following questions:

What role do women play in modern society? What are the main sociocultural tendencies that influence individual’s attitude towards the body? How important is a human body in modern society? How typical or unique are women’s attitudes? What body meanings are suggested to women by modern society? What ideals of women’s bodies are presented in the Western culture? What aspects of women’s bodies are emphasized in our time? How attentive are modern women to their inner bodies and appearances; to physiological, psychological and cultural components of their bodies? What are the benefits and potential conflicts provoked by modern bodily practices and sociocultural patterns of body perception? How active or passive are women in creating their bodies? What emotions dominate the modern women’s attitudes towards their bodies? What gender norms regulate women’s attitude towards their bodies in our time?

Results. Women’s place has seriously changed in modern Western culture. They are not excluded from participation in the economical, political, intellectual life anymore. On the contrary, women become active in all areas of social interactions. True, some researchers announce that maybe the last and most dramatic limitations of women’s freedom – notions of beauty – are still working. “The affluent, educated, liberated women of the First World, who can enjoy freedoms unavailable to any women before, do not feel as free as they want to... Many are ashamed to admit that such trivial concerns – to do with physical appearance, bodies, faces, hair, clothes – matter so much”[5]. In this connection, the beauty myth may be considered *as a way to take control over women*.

Women’s attitudes towards their bodies are also influenced by *consumerism, medicine, individualism, aiming at self-efficiency and self-control, body objectification and body destabilization* [2, 5, 7, 13, 14, 15, 16]. At the same time, considerable *transformations* have happened to a *body itself*. Since traditional body practices have been destroyed, and labour of majority of modern women is not associated with physical activity, women less experience their own bodies in our time. *Poor body experience* contributes to a feeling of unstable, unpredictable

body and supports the tendency to percept one's body mainly as a fiction, as an image. And this image, women's appearance, becomes extremely valuable in the modern world.

Modern Western civilization tends to exaggerate the importance of women's appearance. A call for being beautiful and investing time and efforts in achieving a definite body's state becomes an imperative of our time. Analyzing the sociocultural ideals of women's bodies, we may recognize a few important characteristics of them. The ideals are unrealistic, limited, strict, and concerns primary women's appearances. They represent motionless women bodies – the objects to be looked at and assessed by others.

At the same time, an inner body is almost unseen by the mainstream of Western culture. Medicine and cosmetology summon women to ignore their sensations and create a perfectible visible body whatever they want. Thus, we may state that physical 'dimension' of the body is neglected then psychological and especially cultural components are overvalued.

Moreover, a 'proper' appearance and specific body-oriented behaviour become *the essence of women's gender identification*. Among potentially harmful to a woman's individual life and her psychological well-being gender patterns we may name the following: the preoccupation with beauty and the body, the devaluation of the natural body's state, the goal of bodily perfectibility, the radical efforts to achieve and maintain 'ideal' appearance, the excessive attention to the weight, the extreme dieting and exercising, the pseudosexual behaviour [2, 5, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21].

How do all these tendencies affect an individual woman and her attitude towards her own body?

First of all, we have to admit *the importance* of her own body for a woman. Women pay great attention to their appearance, weight, skin, hair, etc [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22]. At the same time, they recognize their bodies as unstable and unpredictable. "Their bodies are on high alert. The norm has become to worry... We have become so implicated in variants of body preoccupation ourselves, and girls and women in particular so colonized by them that the preoccupation has become second nature – almost 'natural' and invisible" [2].

The second important characteristic is *bodily self-alienation*. The bodily self-alienation may be described as a setting such a mental distance to own body that the body is not recognized as "I" and is perceived as "an object to be possessed and worked on" or even "the other, stranger". Women are so used to think about their own bodies as objects that the intimate feeling "I am also my own body" can be disturbed. In that case, a woman may ignore her body or percept it mainly as *her personal project* – a sign of her success or fail in becoming a 'perfect' woman.

The bodily self-alienation is a widespread phenomenon in modern Western culture [2, 5, 13, 15, 17, 18, 21, 22]. It not only distorts women's self-perception but reduces women's psychological well-being, social life, relationships with others, health-related behaviours [2, 4, 13, 18]. Thus, it is important to study self-alienation and to help women to accept their bodies and achieve satisfactory attitudes towards their bodies.

Another important feature of modern women's attitudes towards their bodies is *the appearance prevalence in self-perception*. Women tend to understand their bodies mainly as external – "I for the other" (Bakhtin) – and to be unaware of the complexity of their inner bodies. Since this tendency disturbs the intimate connection with one's self, it *supports body destabilization and makes a woman extremely dependant on other's opinions and sociocultural body patterns*. Yet again, it is crucial to assist women in developing authentic attitudes towards their bodies.

According to the model of the *physiological-psychological-cultural body unity*, modern Western women chiefly associate themselves with psychological and especially cultural components and are anxious about physiological dimension - 'a body as a body' (Orbach). It also supports the body destabilization and body objectification, and leads to the body dissatisfaction and poor body experience.

Analyzing the *emotional component* of modern's women attitudes towards their bodies, we should admit body anxiety, specific body shame, guilt, frustration, dissatisfaction, and fear for losing control over themselves [1, 2, 4, 5, 13, 17, 18, 23, 24, 25]. Certainly, there are individual

differences between women. We may suggest that the more a woman desires a 'perfectible' body and perceives her body as an object, the more she experiences those negative feelings.

We presented a rather dramatic picture of modern women. But does Western culture provide any benefits to modern women? We guess, yes.

Firstly, it is the benefit of *freedom*. In our time women are free to choose their body practices, they have great opportunities for improving their health, self-perception and lives. Moreover, they are called for it. 'The care of the self' (Foucault) is considered to be a legitimate and even socially desirable practice. Modern women are *impelled to become active creators of their lives and bodies*. In this connection, cultural interest in a woman's body is not only a restrictive obligation. It is also a chance to become an authentic person and to take care of an important life area – of the body. Since human bodies are overstressed by the lack of motion, poor ecological conditions, diseases, women have to pay special attention to it. And this *care for the body and for oneself* is the positive core of the beauty myth and the preoccupation with the body.

Thus, we have revealed key body sociocultural tendencies, potentially harmful bodily gender patterns, and have characterized modern women's attitudes towards their bodies. We have shown how important is one's own body for a Western woman and how it influences her self-esteem, relationships with others, health, health-related behaviours, and individual life in general. We have also emphasized the role of personality in assuming the sociocultural patterns. Women are not passive advertising and social norms recipients. They are active participants of the social interactions and creators of their self-perception and lives.

In this connection, it is important to study women's personal activity addressed to their bodies. We believe that the concept 'a woman's attitude towards her body' may be a useful research tool and may help both to understand and improve a woman's life.

5. Summary

A woman's body becomes a site of alarming attention and anxiety in modern Western culture. It results in the women's preoccupation with their body, body dissatisfaction, body destabilization and persistent women's attempts on bodily improving. These tendencies seriously restrict a woman's individual life and affect her psychological well-being and health. At the same time, modern culture gives a woman an opportunity to organize and to actively create her own life, appearance and body practices. Moreover, women are called for developing their personal positions on their bodies.

Therefore, it is important to investigate the complexity of a human body, the women's appropriation of body sociocultural patterns and the women's personal activity addressed to their bodies. The term "a woman's attitude towards her body" may be considered as a helpful psychological concept. This concept describes a woman's personal - mediated by self-conscious and self-oriented practices - connection with her body as a subjective significance, continuous personal activity in distinguishing and joining with the complexity of woman's own body.

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