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A STUDY ON SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES IN BODY IMAGE

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Abstract

Body image is a mental image of one's body as it appears to others. Body image is a psychological issue that deals with the individual. In the discipline of sociology body image is not just an individualistic issue but a social issue. Overtime, the body image is not properly interpreted in the discipline of sociology. In the present paper a social concept of body image has been created by applying sociological theories where Functional Theory is applied to explain that the body image is created in social system by external forces. Applying Conflict Theory, it has been shown that class, gender, and power etc. works in the concept of body image. The lower class is not as easy as the upper class to retain body attractiveness. In the same way, the concept of women-men and elite also explains the body image in the conflict lens. Finally, Symbolic Interaction Theory presents body image as a product of social interaction where body image is a matter of social-self, social learning and social perception.

Keywords: *Body Image in Society, Sociological Theory, Social Forces, Social Stratification, Social Interaction*

Introduction

This paper delineates the application of sociological theory in analyzing body image. Body image is a very discussible topic in psychology because it highlights the well-defined individualistic phenomenon. In the discipline of sociology, the body image is a very little studied topic. So, a sociological understanding of body image has been created by applying sociological theories in the present paper. Sociological theory is the 'systematically-organized, law-like propositions about society that can be supported by evidence'. Sociological theory formulates by concepts and logical propositions and always open to revision depending on new evidences. There is a role of sociological theory in social research. According to R.K. Merton, there are five ways by which sociological theory influences social research. Sociological theory provides general orientations, developing sociological concepts because the concepts are main ingredients of theory. After that sociological theory furnishes sociological interpretation and then formulates empirical generalizations. Finally, further developed the sociological theory (Abraham, 1982). Although, there are two types of sociological theory: Macro and Micro Sociological Theory.

In this paper, it is possible to understand the discussion of body image with the application of sociological theory through macro and micro perspective. Macro sociological theories are broader in scope, focuses on the study of widespread social process like theories of society, culture, stratification. On the other hand, micro sociological theories are narrower in scope, focuses on the study of social interactions among the atoms of society like role theory, psychological reductionism and so on. Since the functional and conflict theories are broader in scope so these theories are regarded as macro sociological theory because these

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theories are focuses on the social system, process, change, power and so on. In the case of symbolic interaction theory, this theory is regarded as micro sociological theory because this type of theory focuses on self, role, act etc. In the present paper, body image is interpreted by applying macro and micro sociological theories. Body image is a discussible topic in both discipline of psychology and sociology, originated in the work of Paul Schilder in 1920s. Body image is a multidimensional concept and generally understood as a mental image of one's body as it appears to others. According to Paul Schilder body image is "the picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say, the way in which the body appears to ourselves" (Grogan, 1999). There are two types of body image: Positive body image and Negative body image. Positive body image means when a person feel satisfied and healthy about own body. In compared to negative body image is regarded as unhealthy, where individuals are dissatisfied about their own body (Halder and Mondal, 2020).

So, in the discipline of psychology the concept of body image is an individually determined construct and one the hand in the discipline of sociology the concept of body image is a socially defined phenomenon (Fedorowicz, 2015). The link between body image and the sociological theory is crucial to the discipline of sociology. Three sociological theories (macro and micro) have been used to conceptualize the body image. Sociological theories including the Functional theory, Conflict theory and Symbolic Interaction theory each is describe briefly. Above the all sociological theories, that explain the sociological understanding of body image.

Objectives of the Paper: The primary objective of this paper is to outline the understanding body image through the lens of macro and micro sociological theory which has been focuses on three issues:

- To understand the body image as a social issue.
- To understand the body image as a pattern of hierarchy.
- To understand the body image as a nature of social interaction and self-image.

To illuminate the findings of these issues, researcher has collected data through secondary source and applied the functional theory to interpretative analysis of the body image as a societal issue than individual issues. Apart from that the analysis the conflict theory to understand the body image as a pattern of hierarchy whereas the class, gender and power is very much regarded. Finally analysis the symbolic interaction theory to understand the body image as a nature of social interaction and self-image.

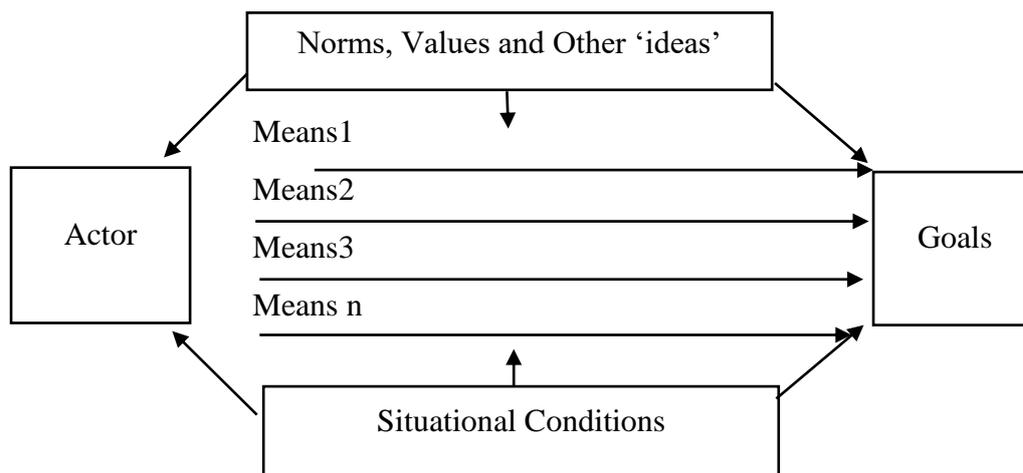
Functionalism and Understanding Body Image as a Social Issue:

Many sociological theories are applicable to the discussion of body image in the discipline of sociology. Functional theory is one of them which helps to explain the body image in a social way. Functionalism provide macro sociological perspective to analyzing the body image. Functional theory has emerged as one of the primary frameworks within integration, social structure and social action has been conceptualized. Functional theory explains the analogies between society and organisms. So, the main theme of the functional theory is to explain the structure and the interrelationships of social system (Abraham, 1982).

French sociologist Emile Durkheim, American sociologist Talcott Parson and Robert King Merton who are famous proponents of functional theory. Theory of social fact by Emile Durkheim, social action theory by Talcott Parsons and the theory of manifest and latent function which has enriched the functional theory immensely. According to Emile Durkheim, Social facts are social structure, cultural norms and values which are the external forces and these things always effect actors (Ritzer, 1995). The concept of social fact by Durkheim is very applicable to the discussion of body image. Social fact shows that body image is not based on individual belief but it's based on social norms and values. Social structure, norms and values all these things always affect the person accordingly the issue of body image is more concerned with social issues than with individual issues (Fedorowicz, 2015).

Another important theory in functionalism is the Social Action theory developed by Talcott Parsons. Social action theory can be conceptualized as the Voluntaristic Theory of Action posits that while working, actor finds many alternative means in the social system from which the actor wants to reach the

goal according to a mean. Of course, all means are sanctioned by social norms and values. That is, there are many means for an actor to act and the actor chooses one of them and completes the action (Turner, 1987).



(Source - Voluntaristic Theory of Action, J. Turner, 1987, page- 61)

Understanding body image as a Voluntaristic Theory of Action suggest that there can be positive or negative feelings in a person about the body and again person can be satisfied or dissatisfied about the body. When the person is dissatisfied with the body then there are alternate means for a person to change the body shape such as dieting, exercise, cosmetic surgery, dancing and so on. Although next to nothing that, the goal of the person is to change the body shape and for that person chooses one of these means and changes the body shape.

Apart from the Durkheim's functionalism and Parsonian functionalism the famous American sociologist R.K. Merton who gave the idea of manifest and latent function. Merton's functionalism is relevance to the body image. According to Merton the Manifest functions are the consequences that people easily observe and expect when performing an act. On the other hand, the latent functions are those that are not recognized. In the contemporary era, appearance is most important to the person. Person always seeks to improve good looks. So the good looks is assumed to indicate a manifest function in society and on the other hand, maintaining good looks in various ways indicates the latent function in society (Jacobs, 2003).

Conflict Theory and Understanding Body Image as a Pattern of Hierarchy:

When looking at the issue of body image through a conflict lens then it can be said that like functionalism, conflict theory provides a macro perspective to the analyzing body image (Boston, 2003). Our society is stratified society where different hierarchies are present. An unequal distribution of power, wealth and status can be observed in stratified society. Conflict theory discusses this unequal distribution of society where conflict is noticeable at every stage in society like upper, middle and lower stage. So, conflict theory posits that how social stratification has been maintained.

Karl Marx, Max Weber and C. W. Mills who are famous proponents of conflict theory. Karl Marx's concepts of class, Max Weber's concept of social stratification, C.W. Mills' concept of the power elite are also relevant to the issue of socially approved body image. Concept of class by Marx highlights the class conflict. According to Marx, there are two types of class in society one is bourgeois and another is proletarians. The bourgeois are the class those are on top of the hierarchy, and on another side the proletarians are the class those are on bottom of the hierarchy. Since the bourgeois is at the top of society for that bourgeois are entitled to high wealth, high status and high power, so they are the upper class or ruling class in society. On the other hand, in the case of the proletariats, it is the totally opposite.

Like Karl Marx another sociologist Max Weber who gave the theory of social stratification where Weber explains only three dimensions such as class, status and party. Unlike Marx, Max Weber explained the

class based on market situation and life chances. Class always locate in economy, so those who have more power they are exist on the top of the economy and those who have less power they are exist on the bottom of the economy. Needless to say that, those who are at the top of the economy their life chances are high and those are below the economy their life chances are low (Hariharan, 2015).

Class, gender and power is a central issue in conflict theory, in the case of body image concern it can be said that, we live in era where the popular culture through media and television rub by powerful members of society. Although, nowadays various beauty or cosmetic industries are affecting people in different way such as thinness, ideal body shape, beauty, dress up etcetera (Jacobs, 2003). In our society those who are upper class people they are easily maintain their body by direction of popular culture. So, the tattooing, piercing, gym, dancing and more are very easy thing for upper class people. This way upper class people can easily maintain their body through body modification and they feel relaxed about the body and also happiness and high self-esteem is observed. But on the other side, those who are lower class people they are not easily maintain their body by direction of pop culture. So, they are dissatisfied about the body and they have low self-esteem. Although needless to say that, a hierarchy is created in society centering on the body image. The upper class people in society who portray the ideal body in people mind and they can easily afford it, but lower class people can't afford the tools of body modification so they are dissatisfied about their body. In the case of men and women, nowadays women are less satisfied about their body than men because it's all about the hierarchy system of society (Halder and Mondal, 2020).

Apart from the Marx and Weber another sociologist C. W. Mills who coined the term the power elite. The power elite means those who are top in economy, society and military. According to Mills the power elites always makes decision to the society and doesn't take responsibility for result of their work (Abraham, 1982). In body image context the concept of power elite can be applicable. Popular culture is rub by the elites of the society who are providing the concept of body modification among people through various advertises and media, So, in this regard power elites are always portrays on ideal body image to people, which is possible by upper class people but never possible by lower class.

Symbolic Interactionism and Understanding Body Image as a Nature of Social Interaction and Self Image:

Symbolic interaction theory has also been used to conceptualize body image concerns. Contrary to functional theory and conflict theory, symbolic interaction theory focus on self and provide a micro perspective as well as socio-psychological perspective to the analyzing body image. There is a powerful domain of symbolic interactionism when it comes to discussing body image because body image is generally understood as a self-image of one's body as it appears to others. So, in body image context, Symbolic interaction plays a significant role in people to act or look a certain way (Boston, 2003). According to this theory how people are interact and thus symbolic interaction theory focuses on the nature of interaction, social relationship and patterns of social action (Abraham, 1982).

C.H. Cooley, G. H. Mead and Erving Goffman who are associated with symbolic interactionism. Concept of looking glass self by C.H. Cooley, Concept of development of self by G. H. Mead, concept of dramatology by E. Goffman that is very important to understand the body image concern. Charles Horton Cooley, one of the most prominent pioneer in symbolic interaction theory focused on social self. Cooley's Looking glass self is the mental picture of oneself and posits that how person views themselves in the eyes of others in society (Fedorowicz, 2015). Looking glass self is a product of social interaction and interpret the perception of one's self as a reflection on the perception of others. In other words, the self emerges through interactions with others, so emergence of self is not individual but social that is the self is a social construction. Cooley outlined the three principle dimensions of looking glass self: firstly, how we imagine our appearance to others; secondly, how we imagine others' judgment of that appearance; thirdly, our personal feeling about that judgment (Abraham, 1982).

Cooley's concept of looking glass self is consistent with body image, implies that body is not the individual issue but body is become a social issue because the person can understand his/her own body and appearance as perception of others persons (Halder and Mondal, 2020). That is to say, a person can understand how is his/her body (like thin body or thick body) through interaction with society. When a person interact with others persons in society then the persons of society give different kinds of comments about this body, and based on these comments a person can understand his/her own body.

Like Looking Glass Self, the Development of Self has important applications in symbolic interactionism derived from George Herbert Mead. In symbolic interaction theory, the development of self is more complex than the looking glass self. G. H. Mead conceptualize three stages of development of self: (1) the stage of imitative acts, (2) the play stage, (3) the game stage. Therefore, Mead trying to show that the imitative stage begins in the second year of life where child learns the mannerisms and behavior. The play stage begins in the third year of life where individual has interest in assuming various roles of significant others. For example, children play the role of father and sometimes play the role of mother. The third and final stage is the game stage, where the self is emerged. At this time individuals learn ideas about the larger social environment, this is known as the generalized others (Abraham, 1982). This is, when people are ready to do something, they see how society or social environment is view and judging them (Fedorowicz, 2015).

In body image concern, Mead's concept of development of self state that the third stage of self development is the game stage, develops the self-consciousness of the person. A person learned the ideas about body image from the larger social environment (Boston, 2003). The idea of a person's body image is formed when society and the social environment judge differently.

Apart from the Looking Glass Self and the Development of Self, the Dramaturgical approach is an another theory that developed by Erving Goffman. As in most symbolic interaction theories, dramaturgical approach is more relevant and powerful to understanding the body image. According to Erving Goffman, dramaturgy is a ritual and we all take part in dramaturgy. life is like theater where performers and audience are exist. In presentation of self in everyday life, Goffman talked about stages on which every life's theater is performed and all performance are real. Goffman talked about two types of stages, one is Front stage and second are Back stage. Front stage is a place where a performance is goes on, whither performers always make an impression to the audience through the performance. On the other hand back stage is a place that is not visible from the frontstage, whither performers are preparing to go to the front stage and on this back stage performers hiding the refuse as well as dirty work (Collins, 1988).

In body image context, dramaturgical approach understand that since life is a theater and there are performers and audience on this stage. According to Goffman's frontstage-backstage model, when a person presents his/her body and appearance, he/she always tries to maintain the impression on front stage. That is, in the front stage the person always wants to show himself/herself confident, skinny and beautiful. On the other hand, what a person has to do to maintain body and appearance is not presented in front of the viewer, always kept secret. That is, in the back stage the person always be scared, confused, alone, and miserable (Boston, 2003).

Conclusion

Body image is currently the subject of discussion in both psychology and sociology disciplines, although the subject-matter of the discussion is particularly different on the basis of both disciplines. In sociology, body image is a social issue because man are located in society and also society are located in man. The main objective of the paper was to explore the application of sociological theory (Functional, Conflict and Symbolic Interactionism) to analyzing body image, focuses on three issues- body image as a social issue, secondly a pattern of hierarchy and finally a nature of social interaction as well as self-image. So, this paper is totally based on theoretical perspectives and all data were collected through secondary source. The conclusion that can be drawn from the theoretical analysis are as follows:

- Body image is based on the social norms and values because which are the external forces of society that always effect on person's body image.
- There are many ways in society for boy image enhancement. Negative feeling about the body image of the person, which helps to choose any one way of social action to enhance body image.
- Person's assumption of good looking which indicates the manifest functions but its maintaining indicates the latent functions in society.
- Consumer culture are affecting people in various ways like attractiveness, thinness, ideal body shape and more, those who are upper class in society easily afford this and maintain their body by direction of consumer culture but in the case of lower class people those who are not easily maintain.
- In the context of body image, class factor is not only a factor but power is an another factor in body image. Power elites in society always portrays on ideal body image and make differences in women and upper -lower class people.
- Body image is a product of social interaction because person can understand their own body through perception of others and interaction with others in society.
- Body image is not only a product of social interaction but a social learning. Person learnt their own body image from larger social environment.
- Body image is the person's self-image. Person always presenting their self through their own body in society and want to show skinny, beautiful and attractiveness in front of others. So, person always maintain their self by their positive body image in society.

Over time, in the discipline of sociology, various researches have been done on body image and concept of body image are being interpreted from a social point of view. Nowadays media issues, consumer culture, technology and more has become a hot topic in body image.

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