

# How are bodies socially constructed



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

It is crucial to gain an understanding of what social construction is, in order to assess its influence on human bodies. However it is difficult to operationalise social construction in literal terms. Social construction encompasses a multitude of elements, Hacking (2002) notes, 'social construction is a kettle of many very different kinds of fish'. Typically however, social construction is concerned with the ways in which society has conceptualised ideals and expectations, looking at this in relation to specific areas of sociological interest. For sociologists when looking at the body their main concern is with 'the process of... transforming a biological entity through social action' Chris Shilling (2003).

'Members of a society construct their bodies in ways that comply with their gender status and accepted notions of masculinity and femininity. That is, they try to shape and use their bodies to conform to their culture's or racial ethnic group's expectations'. (Lorber and Martin 2005)

This essay will look at the ways in which the body is a social construction, with particular focus on the extent in which individuals in society are willing to perform to socially constructed ideals. It is important to recognise that social construction of the body is a global phenomenon; however this essay will look at westernised social construction of the body in particular.

By looking primarily at the social construction of femininity, a subject which has typically been theorised extensively when looking at the body, an attempt will then be made to look at the social construction of masculinities and the aging body, in relation to the complex role that society's expectations have to play.

The body is often seen as something which is 'straightforwardly biological, 'natural' and given.' (Macionis and Plummer, 2005). Unsurprisingly different types of bodies can be seen in terms of shapes, sizes and physical build; however there is an increasing notion of what aesthetically is socially acceptable, with women in the media industry in particular being promoted in a certain way. 'In affluent Western societies, slenderness is generally associated with happiness, success, youthfulness and social acceptability' (Grogan, 1999). This notion could be said to have largely contributed to the fact that, increasingly, women are dissatisfied with their bodies. For Grogan (1999), media, as an industry, depicts the ideology that slenderness is preferred. This factor no doubt, has impacted the rise in eating disorders and women's willingness to have cosmetic surgery in modern times, in order to fit such ideals of slenderness which are conceptualised in magazines and television programmes. 'In western culture dieting, breast enhancement and face-lifts are ways that women have changed their appearance to fit ideals of feminine beauty' (Kivisto, 2005)

Grimlin (2000) looks negatively at the role of cosmetic surgery, as a multi-million pound industry, with the notion that women's bodies are treated as commodities, 'Cosmetic surgery stands, for many theorists and social critics, as the ultimate symbol of invasion of the human body for the sake of physical beauty.'(Grimlin 2000). This view could be criticized, in the idea that many women who choose to have surgery, rather than to fit in with social constructions and therefore demands of society, do so in order to express their own personal individualism and identity, perhaps advocating their rights of freedom to adapt their own body if it pleases them to do so.

Featherstone and Turner (2001) note 'Bodies have become the ultimate vehicle for writing ones identity.'; this looks at anything from the clothes and makeup an individual wears, to self decoration through tattoos, piercings and cosmetic surgery. It is questionable to what extent women 'self decorate' in order to fit the stereotypical views of social expectations of what is 'beautiful', or to oppose these views of conventional attractiveness, both however implicitly relate to the body as a social construction, either in a way that conforms to, or rebels against ideas of socially constructed beauty.

Sexuality is closely linked with that of the female body, with socially constructed expectations of sexual femininity, 'Women are expected to be nurturant and emotionally giving, willing to subordinate their own desires to please men and their own interests to take care of children, Therefore women's bodies should be yielding and sexually appealing to men when they are young and plumpy maternal when they are older.' (Kivisto 2005). This mass of generalizations, and assumptions, (that women are heterosexual, that all women want children, that women will forget about their own pleasures to please men), highlights the typical socially constructed views of western culture. It is therefore important to notice a change in women's sexual role through feminist ideas which reflect a modernized culture, with a new type of woman emerging in the 21st century. Through 'promoting sexual autonomy', feminist's attempt to, 'advocate women's control of their sexuality and reproduction.' (Macionis and Plummer 2005), making their bodies less socially constructed to please male expectation.

It is interesting to look at the social construction of the body in relation to the process of aging, as commonly, especially in traditional thesis, the bodily

aging process has been referred to as a biological one, without consideration of its social relevance,

'Popular stereotypes about old people, usually centered around the inevitability of old age and its manifestation as physical decrepitude from which culture irrelevance could be inferred. Old age was therefore out-side the social because it was an essentially biological process.' (Tulle-Winton 2000).

With this in mind, Christopher A. Faircloth (2003) looks explicitly at the social construction of the aging process on people's bodies. Reinserting that older bodily images are ones which are to be looked at with equal importance to younger women. Faircloth (2003), gives a detailed examination of the sexual attractiveness of older aged women (than that which is traditionally conceptualised in the media), concluding that there need to be seen as sexually attractive is still of extreme significance. Faircloth looks at the visual representations of older women through the realms of film and photography for example, with specific reference to a loss of sexuality in the representation of the older generation in society. Similarly Itzin (1986) states, 'Rarely are women portrayed as capable and independent, never as sexually attractive', (with the word 'women' in this case, referring specifically to that of older women). Itzin notes that societies construction of what is sexually attractive is rarely looked at in relation to that of the older generation.

When looking at the social constructions of femininity and the aging process, it can be seen that menopause is often reflected which considerable

negativity, with the term being one which has connotations of a loss of sexuality and the idea that a noticeable change on the youthfulness of a women's body can be seen. These socially constructed misconceptions, suggest that the menopause directly affects a women's body, creating wrinkles and bodily sagging, which biologically is not the case (Winterich 2003). In a bid to maintain the socially constructed body which is considered attractive, characteristically one of youthfulness, merchandise, such as hair colouring products, anti-wrinkle creams and an increased number cosmetic surgeries can be seen to be endorsed by the older generation, (Craig Thompson 1995).

Traditionally much theoretical focus on the social constructions of body, has been on that of femininity; however the social constructions of masculinity can be considered similarly,

'western societies expect men to be aggressive initiators of action and protectors of women and children, therefore their bodies should be muscular and physically strong', increasingly 'Men lift weights, get hair transplants, and undergo cosmetic surgery to mould their bodies and faces to a masculine ideal' (Kivisto 2005)

This observation of men in the 21st century shows masculinity of the body to be concerned with that of aesthetic pride in a similar way to women, however there is less pressure on the male community to fit the mould of these constructed ideals.

A modernised new man is also represented to fit the ideas of social construction, with the coinage of the phrase 'heterosexual male' to highlight the increased notion of male grooming as acceptable in society.

Inevitably this essay only looks at a small spectrum of the features that contribute to the body as a social construction, however a lot can be seen on how the body is effected by the views of society, a body which conclusively is not only 'biologically constructed' but also socially.