

Session: Contemporary Applied Sociology: Body and Communication

Author: Maria João Cunha – ISCSP/UTL – Lisbon, Portugal

Body Image and Media: a sociological approach to the importance of the body and relevance of media for Portuguese adolescent girls

Our purpose is to study body image and its relation to media within a sociological approach, from the stand-point that it combines physiological, psychological and social aspects and that it is built in a dynamic way, based upon beauty patterns, defined by culture. By pulling these aspects together, body image has become a very important subject in the study of body and society, representing the impossibility of treating separately body and mind, thus binding together social, physical and biological and melting down traditional dualistic oppositions, leading the way to an *embodied* sociology.

Body image is a central part in self and social identity in our consumption society and stands as an important subject for Sociology, both theoretically and empirically. Body and appearance shape the way we act and interact in society, thus contributing to self image, from childhood into adulthood, being adolescence a decisive stage in this construction that results from the process of socialization. In this process several agents intervene, such as family, school, peer group and media, the agent whose importance has been increasing in face of the others, to whom traditionally questions were asked. Media have gained a reference status, also during adolescence as a critical stage in the construction of body image. Television and magazines tend to create body representations that do not correspond to reality, namely through fashion models, and social pressure to achieve these ideals is especially put on women. In this visual society, of the importance of the 'look', as noted by Craik, body image is built in a reflexive way, by socialization and observation of others, peers and especially models. These models represent certain beauty patterns that frame the construction of an 'ideal' body - that stands for success, power and well being - towards which women tend to evaluate their own body

The role played by media in the construction of self identity through its representation of ideal bodies and successful selves has become of great importance in sociological studies. In order to approach this subject in an empirical way, we studied body image in adolescent girls in relation to the role played by media by applying an inquiry to a clusters' sample of 466 teenage girls from public schools in Lisbon, between the 9th and the 12th grade.

The results show that the majority of the teenage girls feel dissatisfaction towards their body figure, engaging in behaviours designed to achieve thinness, despite most of them are within normal or below normal body mass index. Beyond the influence of the referred 'ideal' body type in the teenagers' social life, we have found that there is a successful identification of models represented in feminine magazines and a clear relation between the way adolescents evaluate these and their own bodies.