

Order of Gender and Body Dissatisfaction: a qualitative analysis

Orden de Género e Insatisfacción Corporal: un análisis cualitativo

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Abstract

This article addresses the unsatisfactory experience with one's own body from a gender perspective. The research uses qualitative methodology to analyze personal accounts about tense corporeity. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were carried out; they were focused on life experiences, self-image and personal experiences with body. The results are organized around three fields. Firstly, socialization and family relationships in one's perception of oneself; secondly, the subordination of health and beauty to a stereotypical image of gender; finally, the uneven experience of tense corporeity for men and women, limited to the physical aspect for men, and full of distressing and emotional tinge for women. Compared with other studies, this research confirms the distinct relationship with the body between men and women.

Key words: Body Image. Feeding Behavior. Gender Identity.

Resumen

Basándose en el estudio del cuerpo en relación a las normas socioculturales y al contexto histórico en que éste se sitúa, el artículo aborda, desde una perspectiva de género, la vivencia de las relaciones insatisfactorias con el cuerpo propio. La investigación utiliza metodología cualitativa para encontrar relatos íntimos sobre la corporeidad tensa. Se han realizado un total de 16 entrevistas semiestructuradas – 13 a mujeres y 3 a hombres – centradas en las experiencias de vida, en el peso de la imagen y en la vivencia personal con el cuerpo. Los resultados se

articulan en torno a estos tres campos: en primer lugar, el impacto de la socialización y las relaciones familiares en la percepción de sí mismo a lo largo de todo el ciclo vital pero especialmente en la infancia y la adolescencia; en segundo lugar, la supeditación de la salud y la belleza a una imagen estereotipada de género; y, en tercer lugar, la desigual vivencia de la corporeidad tensa en hombres y mujeres, que se limita al aspecto físico en los primeros, mientras que para las segundas adquiere un tinte personal y emotivo angustioso. En relación a otros estudios, se confirma la pervivencia de una relación con el cuerpo diferencial entre hombres y mujeres.

Palabras clave: Imagen Corporal. Conducta Alimentaria. Identidad de Género.

Introduction

Social Sciences have shared with Natural Sciences their concern for the body as an object of study, highlighting, in this case, the need to address corporeity in relation to social norms, links and the sociohistorical context to which bodies are subjected.

From this perspective, one cannot ignore the works that consider body a manifestation of domination and control, but also of resistance¹ of those who understand it as a personal space in which social values and meanings are inscribed²; or those who see in it an example of the crises of modernity.³ Taking into account the microsociological analyses performed, the body has been perceived as a representation of everyday life from certain bodily attributes,⁴ or as the axis of the relationship with the world through its own symbolologies.⁵

On the study of the body, gender, as the arbitrary construction of the biological is, along with age, ethnicity and social class, one of the main and most used categories. Gender, as a cultural artifact that models the individual,⁶ confers on sexual differences a social meaning and addresses the interpretation of behaviors, activities and roles of men and women towards the cultural plane.

This notion of gender allows us to take full account of the manner in which a gendered body order is configured; an order in which the construction of male and female bodies naturalizes the androcentric use and the enjoyment of power. At the same time, social representations of such ordination define the expectations and living conditions of each sexual group.

Works carried out by Judith Butler^{7,8} deny the natural corporeity, delving into the cultural construction of bodies. By denying the *natural* essence of the body, one can find culturally molded bodies that carry the narrative inscriptions of history and whose corporeal materiality is but

an effect of power. This androcentric conception of power is reflected in very different bodily evaluations depending on whether they are men or women. According to Bustos-Romero,⁹ the conception of body and physical attractiveness in women fulfills the function of being for the others, either for procreation or as the object of desire of other people, whereas in men, the conception of body and physical attractiveness is linked to male power and control.

The study of the tense corporeity, understood as the analysis of unsatisfactory relationships with the body, connects the ideal body types, the desire to conform to the standard and body building and modeling processes. The relationship between these three factors is not presented in a linear and harmonious way, but rather tense and plagued by regressions and conflicts.

A sphere in which this tense corporeity is clearly perceived relates to eating disorders. Biological approaches to this question insist on the pathological character of behavior, however, from a social point of view, it is necessary to take a closer look at this subject in relation to the context in which the body is socially interpreted.¹⁰

The social construction of gender runs in parallel to concern over the woman's physique.¹¹ The modern obsession for bodily perfection as an instrument for success, social acceptance and happiness presents differential demands for men and women, while for the first it helps keep the ideal of strength associated with a muscular body, for the latter, it demands a conscientious body work toward thinness.¹² The corporal representation of happiness is materialized through slim and thin models and shaved sculptural muscular men.¹³ The obsession for thinness, however, goes beyond the canons of natural beauty, constituting a clinching evidence of female obedience.¹⁴ The use of normalizing strategies associated with power,¹⁵ makes it difficult to individualize the body and affects the widespread quest for docile bodies, capable of self-control and self-discipline, ready to transform and improve themselves at the service of dominant and subordinate relationships. Women's fear of fatness is, in fact, the fear of women's power,¹⁶ since it is a resistance to the dominant social constructs.

Through habitual standards and routines, the body becomes a locus of direct practice of social control.¹⁷ The body is controlled – trained and shaped – through the organization of time, space and daily life. The body is thus a “docile body”.

Wolf explains that as women achieve a remarkable progress when it comes to freedom and rights, the greater is the imperative that demands their attachment to the ideology of beauty. Wealthy, educated and liberated women from the First World can enjoy freedom that was once inaccessible to them. Nonetheless, the more obstacles you overcome, the greater the weight and pressure on your image. It seems that once the feminine mystique of domesticity has lost its ground, the use of feminine beauty replaces the social control part played by the tradition, using it as a political weapon against women's advancement.

The cult of beauty and thinness as a role model is aimed at obtaining social acceptance, status, love and professional recognition.^{18, 9} By seeking bodily transformation as a premise for the transformation of oneself, the ideals of beauty should materialize in concrete performance measures and protocols. Culture not only establishes the rule of a lean body, but also provides the necessary protocols to achieve it.¹⁹

Pressures on gender stereotypes often delve into a negative body image,²⁰ a body dissatisfaction leading to a rejection toward one's own body that begins at very early ages. In this field there are several studies that analyze the role of media and advertising in the standardization of the female body and beauty.²¹ In these works, the strong link established between social success and a stereotyped physical appearance stands out. The need to keep control over the body in the process towards success, a concretion that represents the desire to maintain overall control over their lives, is one of the revealing aspects of the process.

The present article discusses, from a qualitative perspective, the study of the relationships that men and women establish with their bodies. The aim of this research is to unveil, from a gender perspective, personal experiences about the body reported by people who maintain an unsatisfactory relationship with it.

Methodology

In order to consider the differential tension that men and women maintain with their body, a qualitative methodology that allowed to enter into the intimacy of the meanings attributed was used. The scope of this study refers to the people with a tense relationship with their body. From them, a narrative focused on the expectations about the ideal body was sought, as well as their experiences and behavioral self-control linked to food, physical activity or aesthetic procedures.

This makes it necessary to look into the stories in order to understand the context involving the social actors. The incorporation of the system of values and standards on “being”, “feeling” and “doing” is intimately related to one's own experiences and the way of perceiving the world; it is also related to coping strategies and resolution of tensions.²² In this regard, the narrative of the universe of actors' senses makes it easier to understand their experience on tense corporeities.

The technique of interview has allowed us to collect life stories of the participants. Taking into account Bertaux's concept,²³ life stories come out when someone tells another person, researcher or not, any episode of their lived experience.

When selecting interviewees (Table 1), the interviewer's own network has been used. Initially, a family association was contacted, but no participant was recruited. The option of using the Hospital

Units was discarded in order to work with a “non-institutionalized” discourse. To get in contact, the “snowball” technique was used, so that contacts could be obtained from the interviewees themselves.

Table 1. Sample characteristics. Salamanca and Madrid (Spain).

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Selection criterion	Beginning of the process	Intensity of the process	Medical treatment
María	27 y/o	Eating disorder	Adolescence	Getting over	Children's psychiatric treatment (without hospitalization)
Ana	32 y/o	Eating disorder	Adolescence	Getting over	Psychiatric and psychological care (without hospitalization)
Luisa	36 y/o	Body control	From 27 y/o	Getting over	None
Marta	33 y/o	Eating disorder	Adolescence	Getting over	None
Susana	29 y/o	Eating disorder	Adolescence	Getting over	None
Laura	31 y/o	Eating disorder	Adolescence	Getting over	None
Iván	25 y/o	Body control	Present	High	None
Estela	30 y/o	Eating disorder	Adolescence	Getting over	None
Inés (Alba's mother)	Alba's age: 20 y/o	Alba's eating disorder	Present	Very high	Hospitalized (Alba) in a Specific Hospital Day-Care Unit.
Virginia (Rocío's mother)	Rocío's age: 29 y/o	Rocío's eating disorder	Adolescence	Getting over	Psychiatric care and day-care treatments in Specific Units.
Noemí	38 y/o	Body control	Present	High	None

continue

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Selection criterion	Beginning of the process	Intensity of the process	Medical treatment
Araceli	31 y/o	Body control	Present	Getting over	None
Carmen	35 y/o	Body control	Present	High	None
Manuel	34 y/o	Body control	Present	High	None
Noelia	39 y/o	Body control	Present	Medium	None
Jesús	31 y/o	Eating disorder	Present	High	None

The interviews took place in Salamanca and Madrid (Spain) with a duration of one hour and a half to three hours. Interviewees chose the time and place of meeting (a quiet place other than the cafes and public areas, where one could talk without interference).

All the interviewees participated on a voluntarily basis and signed an informed consent. With the aim of protecting the identity of participants, the names that appear throughout the article are pseudonyms.

A total of sixteen interviews were carried out, corresponding to different profiles regarding the tense experience with the body, the capacity of overcoming them and the extent of the problem. Also, the saturation concept and the point in field research at which the data become repetitive and no major new insights are gained were taken into account.

Of the sixteen interviews, thirteen were carried out with women and three with men, the greatest burden falls on the interviews with women due to the fact that females have the highest incidence rate and, thus, it is also useful to know the influence of gender construction over them.

During the interviews, attempts were made to build a “set” that resembles a real conversation, therefore, the interviews took place in the dining room of a house, in front of a cup of coffee or any other beverage, and where it was possible to calmly chat, without interruptions, in a relaxed atmosphere.

The interviews began with general and open questions that facilitated the accounts of participants. All interviewees started from the beginning, talking about their perspectives and experiences. A special atmosphere was created, allowing the participants to express feelings, beliefs, perceptions and not only memories or thoughts.

In the interviews, not only the details of participants' experiences were investigated, but also the meanings attributed by the interviewees were analyzed to construct the social meaning of their behavior. Very intimate and emotionally charged subjects were discussed, and, for that reason, for some moments, interviewees wept when narrating their stories.

The interview script was structured as follows:

- Filiation data: age, place of birth, place of residence, among others.
- Relations with their families, especially with parents and siblings.
- Childhood stories, relevant, sad, cheerful events and memories.
- Teenage years stories: studies, interests/hobbies, relationships, concerns at this age.
- Regarding the current situation: relationships with family, partner, friends, work.

Questions about their personal assessments, such as:

- What was the most important thing in your life? What value is there for you in having good health, relationships, work, image?
- Questions regarding the level of personal exigency, such as: what would you be willing to do?, do you sacrifice yourself too much?, have you sacrificed yourself too much?
- Questions about body habits, concerning the care dedicated to it and the pressure potentially imposed by image in the eyes of others.
- Questions about problems experienced: what do others say? What have been the main problems? What were you thinking at that time? What have been the reactions and counterreactions? (mother-daughter, for example). Have there been any major events – incomes or fights?
- Questions about personal justifications.
- Account of the current situation with questions about solved and unsolved conflicts, personal assessment of the process and current issues.

Among female respondents, two of them were mothers of women with tense body constructions. In their case, the above questions have been asked in relation to their daughter's experiences and their own.

The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed in order to accurately collect the experiences and meanings attributed by respondents. Quotations displayed in the text are a verbatim repetition of the dialogues (individuals identified by pseudonyms).

Results and Discussion

The subject of social constructions of the body and bodily dissatisfaction that was addressed here refers to dynamics in which language plays a central role in the search of an explanation and solutions, since discourse is a place where prejudices, stereotypes and negative representations are re-produced and its analysis allows to read the social reality.

To describe the body pathways from a gender point of view, we focused on the different way in which the male and female interviewees construct their body trajectories.

The results are shown considering three aspects: the impact of socialization and family in the life cycle; gender, health and beauty stereotypes; and the tense corporeity in men and women.

The impact of socialization and family in the life cycle

The biographical construction is a linear, continuous plane, in which childhood and adolescence are vital. The presence of biographical elements in the interview is justified insofar as the overview of childhood, adolescence and adult stages allow us to find the narrated reconstruction of the life cycle of the subject in its fundamental aspects.

Tense corporal construction is formed during lifelong development, when individuals assume different choices based on their relationships with family members, peers, working environment or partners. Such interactions occur throughout the different stages of development and form a complex social fabric that can be reconstructed,¹⁰ through the interviewees' reports, so that one can analyze their taut body trajectories.

In the family environment, their own aesthetic-behavioral parameters are taught from an early age, including the need to pursue a slim look, reinforcing dietary behaviors and rejecting overweight or obesity.²⁴

The sociocultural emphasis on the attractiveness that is taken up by family members usually takes place, especially in the case of girls, in collaboration and in consonance with mothers.²⁵

When I was a child, I wanted to be a model, me, I wanted to be a model, I wanted to have a perfect body, as my mother told me I was thin and tall, then those standards caused me much damage. (Marta)

Authors such as Ricciardelli and McCabe²⁶ affirm that the pressure to lose weight imposed by the mother is the main predictive factor for both male and female bodily dissatisfaction, as well as for the possibility that some of them get involved, in later stages like adolescence, with strategies to change body features.

Also, during childhood, the relation with peers becomes very relevant. The interviewees associate the happiest moments of their childhood with games and friends, as one of the men who took part in the study told us..

Childhood is a happy period, I had a good time, a very good time, I have many memories, [...] I often dream that I am in my school backyard, playing soccer with my friends [...] I well remember a lot of things with affection and with a little nostalgia (Manuel).

However, chronic difficulties in peer relationships such as hostility and isolation may be experienced during childhood. Being identified by the body can be an element of hostility and one might endure social stigma by deviating from the successful bodily stereotype, as one of the female respondents revealed:

During school years I was like...I had a bad time because they used to call me mastodon because I was a very tall, big girl, and it is true that I had a slight inferiority complex (María).

Deviating from the “beautiful” body image established by the culture of “body aesthetics”, and internalized at this stage, can lead to social stigma.²⁷

During the teenage years, the need to adjust to the socially marked body ideals is emphasized by the fact that it is a period of life when significant physical and psychological changes occur and the construction of one’s own image takes on a singular importance. In this stage, the interest and concern for body image generally increases. However, aspects that concern men and women are different, as we can observe in the reports. Male interviewees refer to height and body mass.

When I was a child it was like, I ate a lot [...] I was fat until 6th or 7th grade, when I experience the growth spurt, you know, when you reach adolescence your body changes, and in my case, besides the growth spurt, I started to lose weight, [...] when I was thirteen years old I was almost 1.80 m [...] and then I became more stylized (Manuel).

Women, on the other hand, are concerned about being too big or too tall, as one of them pointed out.

Uff, yes, because I saw my friends who were thin, they were cute, and I saw myself as a real monster and if you look at my pictures, everyone says – you were not ugly, but what took place within me was: I want to be like my friends (María).

The magnitude of body changes that occur in puberty cause an increase in interest and a concern with body image. There are gender differences in relation to the focus of interest and degree of satisfaction with body image. Male adolescents are interested in aspects such as height and muscle mass, which are related to physical power, whereas female adolescents are concerned with aspects such as thinness. In the case of men, during the growth period, body mass index and height increase, which gives them body satisfaction. Nonetheless, in the case of female teenagers, they are confronted with a disharmonious and disproportionate sexual physical development at the early stages, moving in the opposite direction of the socially established body ideals,²⁸ which give priority to thinness, consequently, as they grow older, they feel less satisfied with their bodies.²⁹

Body image involves knowledge and the global symbolic representation of the body itself, it is the way one sees and imagines oneself.³⁰ This view of the body image can be satisfactory or, on the contrary, it can be negative and cause dissatisfaction, as one of the interviewees commented.

I did not like my body, I did not like my back, I did not like my knee, I did not like my face, I did not like my belly, I did not like my body, then, of course, when you do not like your body, it is really hard (Marta).

A negative body image can cause embarrassment, especially if we take into account that women internalize, during the teen years, that their body is important and that it must have certain characteristics to be valuable. Being compared with people or friends who meet these parameters of beauty can cause a distortion of their own body image and the desire to lose weight to approach that model of body that they assume as perfect, as one of the interviewees pointed out:

My friends were very thin and such, I saw them more beautiful, cuter and such, maybe this influenced me in some way (Susana).

If the body causes great dissatisfaction you may want to tame it with a restriction or with an excessive food intake. Increasing physical activities and implementing dietary changes during the teenage years are related to these processes. Exactly as a mother told us about her daughter.

She used 1,5L or 2L water bottles for hand weights, filled them with water or sand, and spent the night doing abdominal exercises and weight lifting [...] she cut down on her eating, just wanted to eat salad and salad or cooked ham or fresh cheese [...] she ate it, but looked for it walking from Santa Marta to Carrefour, we're talking about a really long walk! (Virginia [Rocío's mother]).

The values, in relation to the body, that society establishes directly or indirectly in the form of ideals, are sometimes too high and if one aspires to achieve them, extreme sacrifices will be necessary – regarding food control or a great amount of daily physical activity. As one of the study participants pointed out, in talking about her teenage years:

I started messing around, so, with diet pills, over exercising, [...] vomiting (María).

This has led many of the study participants to base all their thoughts and daily actions on food, feeling highly dependent on that idea, with food serving as the axis around which their lives revolved as well as the sphere of their relationships.

I got into a dynamic and I did not want to leave home, I did not want to see my friends [...] and my friends, I left them aside, for me, it was like my friends no longer existed, I locked myself in the house (María).

Ingestion of certain foods causes guilty feelings, especially in women, who tend to relate the desire to ingest these foods with negative moods, such as boredom or stress.³¹

Well, I had, there have been times that I would have hit myself, that I said, - but I ate a cake! (Estela).

In addition, a poor body image in adolescence may be associated with low self-esteem. If the teenager feels bad about their body, they may feel inadequate as a person and not value their abilities.

I was very insecure, because I was crap, I did not know what I wanted in life, that is, I felt terrible with my body [...] I did not value anything I had (Marta).

If you do not like your body it is hard for you to like the person who dwells in it. Likewise, it is very difficult for women to appreciate qualities of dexterity or work or even intelligence, apart from appreciating of one's own body, women, especially, often subordinate many of these qualities to attractiveness.³²

The female interviewees who, over time, have learned to accept themselves and have gained security, are more lenient with themselves, because self-confident people do not continuously seek the approval of others and nor pursue perfection or bodily perfection.

Today, for example, I say I'm going to do this, or I'm going to cross the line or something like that, I forgive myself [...] nothing happens, enjoy it, I gained in maturity and thus I'm much more lenient now (Marta).

But not all respondents, who have struggled with eating disorders as teenagers, have gained self-confidence or stopped chasing perfection.

I think sometimes I demand too much of myself, because it's like, I feel like I cannot do many things, and I'm doing them, and I'm still doing them [...] but it's like sometimes I see myself as very inferior to others, and such (Laura).

Seen in these terms, according to Moreno, the body tension can increase at such a high level that the process winds up in a psychological treatment to cope with life events, nonetheless, the process can also be reversed, putting a halt to attitudes that favor restrictive provisions until they are eliminated.¹⁰

Gender, health and beauty stereotypes

The body image is constructed alongside the evolutionary and cultural development of an individual and is not only cognitive, but also imbued with subjective and socially determined assessments, which is why it is not impervious to gender identity, according to Cash et al.³⁰

This implies, in line with De Beauvoir,³³ a subordination of the feminine, in the scale of power, to the masculine, something that is reflected in the body pressure received. Women are much more subject to the society's aesthetic standards, because gender constructions have made it possible for women to be considered as an object re-dimensioned according to the opinions of others. Women are instructed to attract men's attention, and it was they who constructed and maintained such aesthetic canons, according to this author, in order to control women.

Thus, it was just that, to give him, not for me, I was thin for him, it was for him, that is, to please him, to tell him not to look at another girl, not to have an affair with another girl, because I thought that the day he left me, well, my world would fall apart (Laura)

Being influenced by the opinions of others may generate body dissatisfaction in women, which is not justified by height and weight, as a mother told us about her daughter:

She says he told her one day (referring to her daughter's first boyfriend at the age of 14 years old), - "gosh, you're getting a huge butt!". She has never been fat, because she's 1.70 m tall and weighs 62 kilos, that's top-notch, as I say, she has never been, but well, this really affected her, I heard her telling herself, always, always, always, that those had blown her mind, it would have been better to overlook that (Virginia [Rocio's mother]).

Regarding the pressure felt by men and women due to image, which can be exploited to thoroughly examine the differential experience on body-related issues, we could say, according to the interviewees' reports, that there is a social differentiation between female and male fatness, which is culturally more indulgent with the male fatness than that of women.

It has more to do with our image, a fat boy is not the same thing as a fat girl, according to society, in other words, if you see a fat boy, he does not catch your attention, but you see a fat girl and, and perhaps we are the ones who start, - look how fat she is, and etc, poor girl, and maybe you'll say - poor girl, I believe society is also a little to blame, it is the one that leaves marks...(Luisa).

The construction of aesthetic canons entails a definition of the female body that is built through a me-other interaction, but furthermore, in line with Bourdieu,³⁴ the whole social structure participates, because body's perceptual schemes, based on comparisons, underlie in the core of this interaction, in the case of the female body, between fat and thin, old and young, ugly and beautiful.

I do take notice of girls, how thin they are, how they dress, how, and I do not see myself that way, then, of course, I say, I would like to see myself like this (Susana).

These factors always mediate relations between a woman and her body, since the image and reactions that her body produces in others, and the way she perceives those reactions, are structured according to those schemes pointed by Bourdieu. The interviewees project onto their own bodies perceptual schemes based on relations of comparison and judge themselves according to that perspective.

I cannot claim to be like (citing the name of a friend), like (citing the name of another friend) that weighs ten kilos, I can't, I mean I can't be that weight (Noemí).

This happens, according to Bourdieu, because the ideal corporeal properties, which are apprehended through social schemes of perception, lead to an evaluation that is applied in consonance with the position each property occupies in the social space, the dominating factors, which are often privileged, and the dominated ones, that want to be avoided, such as: skinny/fat or big/small.

For you, happiness means getting increasingly thinner, getting thinner every day, thinner, that was all, and wearing tighter and shorter clothes and more this, more that, that was all, and come on now I have to get into smaller, smaller, smaller [clothes] (Laura).

In this sense, the body image that a woman has about herself is socially determined and the need for certain size-dependent characteristics, cited by respondents, tries to symbolically place her in a proper scale she herself accepted, the individual that perceives it and who is perceived through it.

If you look bad, you believe other people think you look bad too, if you feel bad about yourself, you think to yourself “how others see me if I look bad”, you know, and yes, well, my closest environment, well, someone you meet, maybe will not tell you anything, because no, but maybe my friends, my parents or my sisters or my boyfriend would tell me - wow, you’re getting too fat (Luisa).

Men’s concerns regarding physical appearance may also lead to strict dietary control and excessive exercise habits, as reported by the male respondents, the root cause of this scenario, as one of the interviewees highlighted, would be related to an attempt to follow fashion trends, to meticulously take care of appearance, in order to achieve a body according to the metrosexual trend. Achieving this body model represents their ultimate goal, but it would be not a matter of gaining the approval of “others”, as the female participants asserted.

I eat a lot, because I have a thin body frame and I want to gain mass [...] the gym comes first, I am being honest, I go to bed and I get up thinking about finding a way to never miss a workout [...]] I started because it was a trend, everyone went to the gym, everyone had bodies, this fashion trend continues now because of metrosexuality and such, and that’s why I enrolled at a gym, as I’ve always liked clothes, and that, and so forth, I like to shave myself, not now, because you know, but I like [...] it was also another motivation, clothes, hairstyle, well then, the body (Iván).

Although men are, just as women, under social pressure to achieve the canons of beauty imposed on society: being strong, muscular, tall and handsome, they do not internalize it the same way, since it is not about “being for the others”, as in the case of women, but it is about achieving the body that is intended is an ultimate goal.

On the other hand, as health and beauty have formed an inseparable tandem in today’s society, the pressure to achieve a certain image is linked to the pressure to achieve a healthy body. The most effective way to accomplish the goals and avoid physical and mental decline is considered, at the same time, a way to achieve beauty. Therefore, through dietary habits that are considered

healthy and physical activity, the purpose is to achieve both, good health and a body that fit the established canons. However, despite the fact that health and beauty seem to go hand in hand, the obsession with perfection and beauty can lead to unwholesome eating habits and behaviors, putting, in some cases, health at risk.

I said to myself, I'm not getting anywhere, I'm going to burn the esophagus, indeed, then, aphonia, of course, because of the gastric juices, the teeth, a lot of problems in your mouth, due to the tooth enamel erosion, that's it, but, well, I realized too late, that's all (Estela).

Female and male participants asserted in their speeches that they seek a healthy body, even though they recognize that are primarily concerned with certain physical characteristics. And to accomplish this goal, they adopt behaviors that are not always healthy, although paradoxically these lead them to get the body that is socially considered healthy as well as beautiful.

I do what I know that is good for my health, but I do, more than anything, for the physique, I want to have a good physique and I know that doing that I will have it, because, for example, with egg whites, because I eat a lot of egg whites, and I know that there is no danger, as the cholesterol and all the bad things are in the yolk, but I eat egg whites every day! I mean, this does not need to be good (Iván).

Tense corporeity in men and women

The female participants considered body thinness as an instrument to achieve happiness. This occurs, according to Giddens,³⁵ because in modern consumer society, the discipline of the body through diet and exercise has become one of the keys to attain an attractive and desirable body that will provide pleasure, happiness and personal fulfillment, and that personal fulfillment match up with the degree to which the bodies conform to the contemporary rules of health and beauty.

As one of the interviewees pointed out, she considered body thinness as the means to achieve happiness, and although she proved that she did not reach it in such a way, fattening keeps causing sadness at the moment she tells her story.

And I must also say that I believed that when I got thin I would be much happier and no, no. When I got thin, I thought I would be happy and everything, but in fact it was when I stopped going out [...] I became bitter [...] I stopped going out, I stopped going out, I stopped doing things. [...] when I got exactly as I was before, I was with people I liked [...] but losing weight or gaining weight can undoubtedly be what saddens me most. [...] you say, I'm sadder because I've put on weight, it's very sad, it makes me sad, sad, to say that way (Susana).

In the modern rules of health and beauty, the human body is suffocated by a metaphorical and commercial representation of perfection and happiness symbolized through slender and thin catwalk models and muscular, shaved and statuesque men. In the case of women, the most valued physical attribute associated with beauty is thinness, whereas in the case of men, it is strength, which is associated with a muscular body.³⁷

And, particularly, women tend to subordinate qualities such success, beauty, elegance, hygiene and health to thinness.³⁸ For that reason, they consider thinness – associated with physical perfection – as an instrument to attain success, happiness, and even wellbeing.

Nonetheless, in the case of men, achieving the desired body is the ultimate goal, as one of the male respondents pointed out.

I want to have a good physique and I know that doing that I'm going to achieve it [...] I really do it to feel good about myself, in fact I don't know, yes, image, it makes sense to look at myself in the mirror and enjoy what I see (Ivan).

The bodily perfection pursued, as one of the interviewees affirmed, has components that are incompatible with each other.

I would like to have a strong well-toned body and be thin, and that, sometimes, it is not compatible, it is not compatible to be strong and to be thin, then, for that, I am therefore between one and another, but, yes, since I was a knee-high to a grasshopper I have abdominals and then I try to keep them above all, really. (Jesús).

Therefore, in order to achieve this bodily perfection, as the study participants revealed, both men and women, they push themselves to the limit, and this is not only a matter of food restriction.

[...] I eat a little bit, then I take away a little bit, I eat a little bit, then I take away a little more, and I eat half the food on my plate [...] I go to the gym four days a week, sometimes on Saturday I go hunting, and Sunday fishing, or something like that, and almost all days of the week I practice sports (Jesús).

It was three o'clock in the afternoon, I ate and left, many times I walked up to twenty kilometers, I put on workout clothing that keeps internal heat and went for a walk, I mean, and for me that was all, eating, in the heat of the summer, at three o'clock in the afternoon, with all the sunrays over me, for me it was just a matter of walking, and walking, exercising, riding a bike, my life was vomiting, eating too little and exercising (María).

In the case of the female respondents, this personal demand is accompanied by a very strong control component.

[...] once I had to eat because my body asked me to eat and it was like, -ufff, and besides, I have to eat, because if I have to eat it has to go, that is, if I can't even control that [...] within twenty minutes I drank water, in which some of that food dissolved, or after ten minutes I threw it up, I had an absolute control over everything (Estela).

This process is described by the female participants with an evident vital anguish.

[...] I have always said that I am going to be a woman who is always obsessed with her body and it overwhelms me [...] physically, maybe, I would like to look much better than I physically see myself, but sometimes I also think that I will never feel good about myself, I mean, it is not because I don't want to struggle to get in shape, it's because I will never be able to achieve it, because I will never see it, even after I achieve it (María).

To attain this bodily perfection, both female and male respondents report that they push themselves to the limit, and is not only a matter of food restriction. But in the case of the female interviewees this personal demand is accompanied by a very strong control component, thus they describe the whole process with a clearly strong vital anguish.

Conclusions

The aim of the present research was, as mentioned in the introduction, to get to know, from a gender perspective, personal experiences related to the body reported by people who maintain an unsatisfactory relationship with it.

In this regard, the idea of corporeality as something that can be modified through nutrition, exercise and care, leads to the concept of the body as a creation of the individual, as something that can be constructed in an attempt to reach some canons of corporal beauty that are associated with personal and social success.

Each historical moment involves a set of social and cultural values that give shape to a socially accepted body model. And certain tense constructions of the body express the anxiety and problems resulting from efforts to conform to these body models.

The values, in relation to the body, that society establishes directly or indirectly in the form of ideals, are sometimes too high and if one aspires to achieve them, extreme sacrifices will be necessary.

Behaviors geared towards the attainment of socially accepted canons of corporal beauty are highly valued, until they reach the limits of a body disorder and unveil a deviation. When this occurs, they are treated as illnesses.

Aesthetic body standards reflect the cultural values of each historical moment. The existence of an socially established and shared ideal of beauty implies, as female and male interviewees who took part in this research pointed out, a significant pressure, which is translated, in some cases, into unusual eating habits and physical activities.

The need to adjust to the socially marked body ideals increases or decreases, depending on age and gender. Regarding age groups, during the teenage years, this need increases, since it is a period of life when significant physical and psychological changes occur and the construction of one's own image takes on a singular importance.

In today's society, thinness has been imposed as a beauty canon and it has spread, especially among women, the fear to be outside body weight and shape standards that the prevailing culture presents as the ideal type. Comparing yourself to other people who meet these beauty parameters can lead to a distortion of your own body image and the desire to lose weight to approach that body model you assume to be perfect.

Gender identity is very important in body constructions, because the self-concept of body of each person is constructed from a gender perspective. The idea of beauty is not oblivious to gender stereotypes. And the canon of beauty is at the base of body constructions, since in these constructions the aesthetic rules that have been internalized in the process of socialization are followed.

In the socialization process, individuals belonging to a particular society or culture learn and incorporate a repertoire of rules, including body norms and values. The main socializing agents are the family and school.

The family is the first socializing agent, especially in relation to the most basic functions that refer to feelings, values and attitudes, within which one can find body values, feelings and attitudes, as well as behaviors that will guide the individual to achieve the body model conveyed.

The family is the first social subsystem where one can observe and practice roles, it offers models, including body models, in which differentiating elements converge and give shape to the social relations that occur in broader social spheres. Within the categories attached to the female role we find, among others, those related to "care". It is about "being for others", something that similarly in the bodily sphere has a great impact.

Peer relationships, too, are essential for social adaptation, since they help manage new social skills and access social norms and processes involved in interpersonal relations. However, chronic

difficulties may be experienced in peer relationships, such as hostility and isolation, related to the body element.

Therefore, the canon of bodily beauty internalized in the early stages of development is part of the criteria that the individual uses as a reference when it comes to defining if he/she is adapted to the socially imposed beauty standards.

In addition, women feel the aesthetic pressure in a more intense and different way than men, since the desire to adjust to the canons of corporal beauty is based, as the interviewees revealed, on the need to please and care for others. However, the male respondents mentioned that they try to achieve socially established body ideals to feel good about themselves.

The female body, perceived and experienced as a living being for the others, is determined by its particular characteristics, such as height or weight, and conditioned by the aesthetic criteria socially established and conveyed by others. This may generate body dissatisfaction in women, which is not justified by height and weight.

However, in the case of men, even if they receive social pressure to achieve the beauty canons imposed by society, they do not internalize it the same way, and the male participants of this study did not experience the need to seek perfection “for the others”. The motivation to take care of themselves for the others may exist as well, as the interviewees told us, but it is associated with the need to feel good about themselves.

On the other hand, health and beauty have formed an inseparable tandem, hence, the most effective way to accomplish the goals and avoid physical and mental decline is considered, at the same time, a way to achieve beauty.

Therefore, through dietary habits that are considered healthy and physical activity, the purpose is to achieve both, good health and a body that fit the established canons. However, despite the fact that health and beauty seem to go hand in hand, the obsession with perfection and beauty can lead to unwholesome eating habits and behaviors, putting, in some cases, health at risk.

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