

Appearance and Adolescence

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Essentially known to be the most troublesome period of life of an individual, adolescence is a “recent cultural invention” (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2000, p.277) that lies between childhood and adulthood. During this developmental stage, individuals, though still children, experience successive emotional, cognitive and physical changes with which it is not easy to cope. These dramatic physical and psychological transformations, as explained in Encarta Encyclopedia Plus (2004), are the result of the extensive activity of the “pituitary gland” that is responsible for increasing the secretion of hormones. These hormones “produce a rapid growth spurt, which brings the body close to its adult height and weight in about two years.” Consequently, the work of this gland is the primary determinant of the individual’s body shape, and depending on its outcome, adolescents may be either pleased or displeased with their appearances for the rest of their lives. Thus, being dissatisfied with one’s body image may have a considerable impact on adolescents’ personality. In fact, appearance is the crucial component of identity development for adolescents.

The evaluation of ones’ physical appearance takes salient precedence over any other feature. It is considered to be “the number one predictor of self-esteem” (The Plenum Series in Social/Clinical Psychology [PSSCP], 1993, p.93). While scholastic competence and behavioral conduct are important to parents, social acceptance and athletic competence are most significant to peers (PSSCP, 1993). Since conforming to their peers’ expectations is a must for adolescents, at a stage where they are looking for a lost sense of self, being physically attractive is the ladder they have to climb so as to reach the social acceptance. Their body image becomes their key to succeed and enjoy a sense of belonging to the boys/girls’ band in vogue in the high school they study in. Researchers of the PSSCP (1993) found out that for most adolescents, body image that constitutes the outer shell, or “outer physical self” is inextricably tied to their “inner psychological self” in the sense that it is an “omnipresent feature of self that is always on display for both others and the self to observe” ( p.95 ). In contrast to this, all the other fields that could be referred to while assessing an individual’s

self-esteem, mainly scholastic or athletic competence, social peer acceptance, conduct and morality, are considered to be “more context specific”(PSSCP, 1993, p.95). Furthermore, when it comes to one’s appearance, one can control how, where and when to reveal each part of it. Hence, appearance becomes the most significant adjustment adolescents worry about during their growth process.

Appearance or body image is not only related to self-esteem, but to eating disorders as well. In fact, ever since 1999, the impact of a negative body image on an adolescent’s life cycle was highlighted by The Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention Inc. Organization who found out that “people with negative body image have a greater likelihood of developing an eating disorder and are more likely to suffer from feelings of depression, isolation, low self-esteem, and obsessions with weight loss” (as cited in Small, 2001). Besides, as argued by Crook (1992), these eating disequilibria, namely, bulimia nervosa, anorexia or compulsive overeating, don’t emerge from eating problems as much as they are a direct emotional consequence of a low self-esteem that stems from a negative body image (as cited in Small, 2001). This clearly portrays the fact that “the relationship between body image and eating disorders is largely emotional and often entangled in low self-esteem” (as cited in Small, 2001). Thus, body image may affect adolescents’ identity by influencing their eating behaviors which when unconsciously dealt with, result in psychological troubles.

Dissatisfaction with one’s body image, at this critical stage of life, may have a serious impact on one’s identity development. In fact, an unsuitable body image adolescents feel they reflect when wearing out of fashion clothes, would lead them to feel subordinate in front of their “in” friends. This would, then, “dig a hole” in their self-esteem and self-confidence barriers. Actually, as stated in (PSSCP, 1993), there is a significant correlation between one’s importance to others and one’s importance to self. What is worse than losing one’s self-confidence and/or self-esteem, when desperate with one’s body image, is the blind follow of peers’ recommendations concerning one’s look, behavior and talking style. Indeed, as soon as

an adolescent gets dissatisfied with his/her body image, they become an easy target to anybody, starting from their bullying peers to more dangerous “soul hunters” such as weird sects’ adepts. Those latter may exploit them according to their desires. They can manipulate them in such a way that their parents may not recognize the child they have raised for so many years. How? Simply, by focusing on their weakness, which, in this case, is their “hopeless” appearance. They would tell them things like “because of their lack of spirituality, of faith etc, they were punished by God”, and if they wanted to regain the perfect body image they dream of, they should find their path to God, and do all the things they will be asked to.

It is frightening how much associated is one’s body image to one’s self-esteem. Under this alliance, people become a set of bodies that have to keep up with the societal beauty standards so as to fit in a social context constantly challenging them to endeavor in their chase for the perfect body. Moreover, as argued by Simone De Beauvoir, “to lose confidence in one's body is to lose confidence in oneself” (as cited in Small, 2001). So, it is clear how much people, especially adolescents, adhere to what is known as the body image worship when they have a glimpse of doubt in their power of attractiveness, which is nothing but a sign of a weak personality since it involves a loss of self-confidence.

Social pressure can provoke similar effects on adolescents. In fact, their sense of self, essentially acquired through body image, is shaped by the manner significant others perceive them. Rare if not inexistent are people who don’t care about the image they reflect in other people’s eyes. While some are more interested in promoting their attitudes and behaviors, the large majority thinks that their behavior and personality are the direct reflection of their appearance. Consequently, if the individual happens to be unsatisfied with his body image, this may constitute a fertile ground to the significant others’ “poisonous injection” of doubt and dissatisfaction. In fact, as soon as those latter would start criticizing, though a very negligible thing related to the individual’s body or even unrelated to it, the individual would start questioning and blaming his/her physical appearance. As a matter of fact, nobody sticks

to the “old” saying that goes: “Never judge a book by its cover.” Further, one judges others through their outside shell and does not try to unbolt it in order to figure out what hides inside. Thus, he/she is pre-disposed to “swallow”, without any critical thinking, their judgments, which in most cases are unfounded. He, then, gets depressed, loses his self-confidence and works hard to modify his/her “below average” appearance. What is worse is that no matter how much superficial the judgment can be it is always seriously taken by most adolescents. As revealed by the former singer DiFranco (as cited in Small, 2001), social relationships greatly influence people’s feeling about themselves. In his song, DiFranco recommends individuals to remain themselves, resist social exhortations and not to care about their pre-established norms and expectations. It is certainly hard not to try to conform to the societies’ so widely shared standards, since “one is constantly appraising him/herself according to others” (Small, 2001), which is the major characteristic of Kohlberg’s second level of identity development, called the “interpersonal conformity” (as cited in Muss, 1996).

Actually, the relationship between social pressure and appearance lies behind two “coexisting means of appraisal”, as stated in a Health Canada article entitled Body Image, Health and Well-Being - The Social Dynamics (as cited in Small, 2001). The first one is “reflected appraisal”, or the fact of seeing and assessing oneself just like others do or think they do. The other one is the “social comparison” that implies rating and comparing oneself to ones’ entourage. That is how actually relationships and others’ perceptions deeply affect individuals’ body image, self-confidence and self-esteem. With regard to this issue, it is hard to find an invulnerable person. Indeed, either the person gets defensive, tries to criticize the criticizer or pretends ignoring his/her rude remarks. Reversibly, if one is the hero subject of tongues, this butters up his ego and enhances his self-esteem. So, why should one let others’ mood, perceptions and personal opinions shape the way he/she perceives his body, which is, after all, a unique gift God gave him/her the complete control of? Wouldn’t it be more interesting to challenge the society to grow, to accept and conform to one’s external shape,

rather than the opposite? In fact, since one is born within a specific society, it is the duty of this society to accept him/her as they are, and not reject her own “products”. Mothers never discard their offspring. On the contrary, they do accept them whether or not they correspond to their expectations.

Defining these significant others is a requirement, at this stage, to give an overall view of the wide range of pressure adolescents find themselves handcuffed by. The first responsible of adolescents’ pessimistic and negative body image are the closest people to their hearts. It may seem paradoxical, but it was proved that parents holding high expectations from their children may destroy them (Small, 2001). In fact, if the parents unreasonably talk negatively about their own weights, or criticize others’ weights, they unconsciously send strong negative messages to their children which portray overweight as a natural human disaster. Accordingly, when parents require from their children some very demanding body expectations, it may completely destabilize them. As a matter of fact, when adolescents fail to handle their parents’ challenging demands, they feel poorly depressed, anxious and completely disconcerted. In some cases, they may even feel guilty. Consequently, adolescents “may take out their frustrations on their bodies through dieting and excessive exercise as a means to gain control over their lives” (Davis, 1999 as cited in Small, 2001). This, as previously discussed, would ultimately throw them inside the eating disorders, self-mutilation and body alterations’ vicious circle, which is unfortunately directly related to the identity diffusion Erickson describes in his theory of identity development.

Peers’ judgments and critics with regard to the adolescent body image interfere in the process of pubescence, too. They play a considerable role in adjusting the substantial psychological transformations the adolescent goes through during this delicate life span. Actually, the body image adolescents have about themselves is not the one they see when facing a mirror, but the one set by their peers. The peers, as stated by Small (2001), “play an integral part in establishing body image, especially during adolescence”. Within their selected

peer group, adolescents, according to Friedman, have the opportunity to check and validate the feelings and attitudes they should have, and also to either stick to or reject their parental values (as cited in Small, 2001). Most adolescents have to conform to this “prophecy” for the sake of the emotional security it provides them with. This security is granted by the homogenous peers’ sphere they live within, sharing the same feelings and looking at the world from the same perspectives. However, if they decide to play the reluctant rebellions, they would not only fall in the trap of isolation and exclusion, but also be defamed and denigrated. As affirmed by Small (2001) “If one behaves differently than her peers or holds opposing views, she may become ostracized, talked about, or teased”, which in turn would affect the adolescent self-evaluation and identity as well.

This social influence was one of the major findings of the American psychiatrist and founder of the interpersonal psychoanalysis, Harry S. Sullivan. He highlighted the great role of culture and society in the development of adolescents’ identity. In fact, he found out that “the intrapsychic component of personality can not be directly observed except through interpersonal interaction” (as cited in Muuss, 1996). He argued that individuals’ relationships with others influence how they develop and what they are. Also, he pointed out that positive relationships with others are a sine qua non condition for individuals to lead a happy and satisfying life (Muuss, 1996). The effect of significant others on individuals pre-established, though latent, body image will be defined from this psychological platform. The self is a social product. In fact, as asserted by Muss, “the self is first and foremost a social self, formed by others”. So, individuals’ sense of self is “shaped by the manner in which significant others see and treat them” (Muuss, 1996). Accordingly, telling a boy that he is effeminate or a girl that she is not feminine enough would make them feel frustrated and push them to do anything to get over this shaming and socially unacceptable shape (Papalia, 1989). Further, as claimed by Davis, “friends may encourage each other to engage in unhealthy behaviors such as dieting and eating disorders and even compete to be the thinnest” (as cited in Small, 2001).

These unsafe recommendations may lead to catastrophic results, such as becoming appearance-oriented and starting to focus exclusively on one's body image, neglecting everything else. Unfortunately, this harmful conduct is very hard to get rid of, since the society the adolescent belongs to assigns all kinds of desirable personality traits to physically attractive people (Walster, as cited in Papalia, 1989). Studies reveal that people, considered to be good-looking by societal norms, are positively responded to. On the other hand, those who are judged to be less attractive are seen as dumb, uninteresting and are not solicited as acquaintances or friends (Walster et al., as cited in Papalia, 1989). Besides, the way one perceives him/herself during adolescence will ultimately influence his future self-perception when adult. It is an irreversible mechanism that has a long term effect. In fact, adults who used to be considered physically attractive by significant others while adolescents, would consider themselves as seductive and, as a result, would have a better opinion of themselves and would be happier than those who were not so gratified (Papalia, 1989). Thus, the physical changes that occur during a relatively short but significant period of time, i.e. adolescence, can affect the psychological well-fare of the person.

Social pressure, through peers and parents is not the only factor that distorts an adolescent's body image. Media throughout TV, movies, ads and magazines lead adolescent girls, in particular, towards an incredibly low degree of self-esteem by the constantly challenging beauty standards it daily glamorizes. Ads, for instance, preach things like: modifying one's looks will boost one's self-esteem (PSSCP, 1993). Mass media is such a powerful and pervasive source of influence, that even if it is constantly changing its role beauty models, women try just as hard to reach them. In fact, the image of the perfect body raised and daily nurtured by the westernized media, underwent dramatic changes over time. It actually shifted from the plump and voluptuous body in the 1890s to the thin and un-curvaceous body, passing by the flat-chested, slim-hipped and androgynous in the 1920s (Small, 2001). However, as observed by Pipher (1994), "while beautiful women are getting

thinner, average women are heavier than they were in 1950s” (as cited in Small, 2001). Such a discrepancy, she continues, leads to eating disorders, unhealthy physical exercises, obsessions, etc.

In addition, when women’s beautiful thin bodies are used to promote products such as cigarettes, alcohol, cars, shoes, etc, adolescent girls get the message that appearance is the most important thing they have to take care of (Small, 2001). It becomes their number one goal in life. To illustrate, “a study of mass media magazines revealed that women's magazines had 10.5 times more advertisements and articles promoting weight loss than men's magazines” (Guillen & Barr, 1994 as cited in NASW, (2001)). In fact, according to a Health Canada study, female bodies when used as commodities show that appearance can outstrip personality and social contribution. Since people perceive attractive “body holders” as intelligent and kind and to have most desirable traits, it becomes a social requirement to be beautiful. This in turn would mean that “anyone who deviates from this ideal may view oneself as incompetent, bad, and ugly” (Small, 2001). Consequently, in a time where media raises the thin look as desirable, attractive and what is worse, easily obtainable, as stated by Brownell, adolescent girls, - sometimes adult women too, would engage in unhealthy behaviors such as “restricting food intake, purging, and over-exercising that have a number of detrimental health effects including retarded growth and delayed puberty” (Ricciardelli & McCabe, as cited in Blowers et al., 2003). Thus, as the media’s beauty standards are getting higher and higher, girls’ body image and self-esteem develop into a continually decreasing curve whose effect is directly reflected in their identities.

The links between appearance and all the above discussed issues are conceivable and easily understandable thanks to their direct relationship with identity. However, what might not seem as straightforward is the link between appearance and wages. In fact, (as stated in Engemman & Owyang), in a recent book Journalist M. Gladwell reported the results of his survey of about one-half of the CEOs (chief executive officers) of Fortune 500 companies.

Economists Daniel Hamermesh and Jeff Biddle used the survey and led a study that found out that: far from any discriminatory factors that could interfere (the study concerned white males exclusively), male lawyers, from the same law school for graduating classes, with a beauty rating rank above average earned up to 10% higher than their fellows with 1 rank below average. A 1.8% increase in wages was found by the same study to correspond to every additional inch of height. A height that is determined for ever at the age of 16 for males. So, if the adolescent is aware that his height at the age of 16 will determine his salary when adult, the substantial transformations or problems he will encounter may be understandable.

Being concerned with one's appearance for adolescents is a requirement in today's society. Under such socio-cultural influences, adolescents' sense of physical shape has become their priority number one in life, surpassing their scholastic performances and/or athletic competences. Moreover, body image has turned out to be an incredible obsession for most girls that are endlessly looking for the ideal body, a body which may even not exist. Under such circumstances, one wonders whether this chase for the perfect body is meant to stop at a specific stage of Kohlberg's identity development theory, or is actually a life long process. Letting one's outer shell manipulate one's mood, alter one's perceptions and modify one's behavior is nothing but a dangerous shift towards the vicious cycle of the constant discontent.

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