Glamour Girls, Pretty Boys and the Quest for the Perfect Body

Even on our best days, it's easy to look in the mirror and find some niggling imperfection. On bad days, it's sometimes difficult to find anything likable in our reflections. For example, how many of you have stood in front of the mirror and said one of the following? "My butt's too big." "I look fat." "I look pregnant." "Instead of a six pack, my abs look like I'm packing a keg." "I'm too skinny." "My nose is huge." "I'm too hairy." "I'm bald." "I look hideous with those dark circles under my eyes." "My breasts look like they're headed for South America." How many of you have thought (or said) similar mean things about someone else's body. And, how many of you have been embarrassed about getting undressed in front of a sexual partner out of the fear that he or she will find you disgusting?

Let's face it; we live in a culture obsessed with body image. We know the standards and we constantly compare ourselves and others to this ideal. There are serious consequences for not measuring up. Research indicates, for example, that obese people and short people tend to get paid less and are less likely to rise in the corporate hierarchy. And, mock trial research indicates that people are more likely to find a scruffy looking or unattractive defendant guilty and more likely to find a clean cut, attractive defendant not guilty.

Glamour Girls

For years, we have known that the impossible images of women shown in the media have had a negative impact on women's self-esteem and satisfaction with their bodies. For women, thinness not only represents attractiveness, it also symbolizes success, self-control and higher socioeconomic status. Jean Kilbourne brings this case to life in her award winning documentaries, *Killing us Softly* and *Slim Hopes*. She argues that the image of women in advertising affects our understanding of how women should look and consequently how we feel about ourselves. Ads not only impact our sense of self worth by telling us how we should look, they tell us how we should feel when we eat. Telling are the ads that equate eating ice cream and chocolate with sin and describe eating a bowl of ice cream in a way that was once reserved for having an illicit sexual encounter. In contrast, we are directed to feel pious and self-righteous when we eat fat free and/or diet food. (This may have something to do with the fact that lots of the low cal or low fat alternatives taste worse than cardboard.) You can find a similarly compelling argument on the *About Face* website: http://www.about-face.org/ .

Consciously or not, many women take the ideal reflected in these images to heart. For example, 89% of the women who participated in the 1997 Psychology Today Body Image Poll reported that they wanted to lose weight. Twenty-four percent of the women surveyed said that they'd be willing to give up 3 years of their life to achieve their weight goals. Another fifteen percent said they'd sacrifice more than 5 years of their life to achieve their ideal weight.

Women's obsession with weight loss begins early. A 1986 study of ten-year-old girls reported similar findings: 81% of the girls reported that they had dieted at least once. The consequences of our culture's obsession with thinness go beyond dieting. Fifty percent of the women who participated in the Psychology Today survey reported that they smoked cigarettes as a way to control their weight and a wide body of research links eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia to the über thin ideal for women.

Women's obsession with body image makes sense. Since at least the industrial revolution, when marriages commonly became unions based on love, women's self worth was tied to how they looked. For centuries, homemaking abilities and looks were the only commodities women had to bring to the marriage market bargaining table.

Perhaps because main stream America did their best to pretend that lesbians didn't exist, and lesbian feminist researchers wanted to believe that we were "above" comparing ourselves to pencil thin models, little attention has been paid specifically to body image issues of lesbian and bisexual women. However, scratch under the surface, and you find that we struggle with body image issues as well. First of all, most of us were exposed to the same magazines, TV shows, music videos and movies as were our straight counterparts. And even if we ignored the images we saw in the media, most of our peers didn't. Those unfortunate girls who didn't meet the cultural standard were at risk for vicious harassment. Even if we were blessed with socially acceptable bodies, it's hard to forget the taunting experienced by our less fortunate peers. Years later, the impact caused by this harassment can be hard to shake, even if it was not directed at us. For example, when I was in high school, a group of senior boys used to hold court outside the cafeteria and rate the girls as they walked by. Not only did they score us on a scale of 1 – 10, they barked at the low scorers, hooted at the high end scorers and gave a running commentary on the reasons for their scores. At that time in my life, I was shy, insecure and "different." I lived in dread of facing the rating game. My stomach still tenses when I think about it.

Second, now that the media has finally acknowledged that we exist, they have done their best to apply the traditional standards of beauty to us. Sure, lesbians in the media have been allowed to bend traditional gender dressing rules, but take a look at the out lesbians who still have a major voice in the media. From comic and daytime talkshow host Ellen Degeneres to Cynthia Nixon, who plays the sassy lawyer Miranda on "Sex and the City," most of the out lesbian actors fit the drop dead gorgeous mold. Similarly, sneak a peek at "The L Word." Not a lot of heavy women to be found. Sure, Rosie O'Donnell and Lea DeLaria stand out in contrast, but Rosie's off the air and has been scorned in the media. And Lea… well who's got the ovaries or balls to mess with her?

For many of us, the media's representation of us as drop dead gorgeous women is a welcome relief because it challenges the public's stereotype of us as "fat ugly dykes" who are only with women because no man would have us. That image still stings because it denies our sexual orientation. And perhaps because of that sting, or our cultural indoctrination to value thinness, many lesbians and bisexual women look to thinner as opposed to heavier women as our ideal partners. Heavy lesbians report hearing

the same sorts of oppressive comments are their straight counterparts. In an interview in *HUES,* women report being criticized by their partners for gaining weight and asked by strangers, even in the "women's community," if they'd had a baby because they'd gained weight. Even butch women aren't immune to the pressure to be thin. According to Sondra Solovey, a legal consultant specializing in size issues and part of the *Fat Girl Magazine* collective, a lot of heavy butch women have struggled with body image issues. Breasts often come as a bonus with the weight they carry and in a world with narrow conceptions of what is acceptable, they are subjected to comments like, "If you have breasts you can't be butch."*

Pretty Boys

In contrast to lesbians, body image has long been an open focus of attention in the gay community. From the early days of physique magazines such as *Physical Culture, Strength and Health* and *Physique Pictorial,* gay male culture has centered on fitness and the eroticization of the male body**. Despite their focus on the body beautiful, most of the scholarly focus on these magazines has been on legal issues relating to their efforts to escape censorship and their function as modern day precursors to *Match.Com* for gay men.   Michelangelo Signorile was probably the first to make the gay male obsession with beautiful bodies a political issue. He interviewed hundreds of gay men about fundamental issues shaping gay life and wove those interviews into his bestselling book, *Life Outside.* Based on these interviews, Signorile vividly describes the desperation that many gay men feel to attain the perfect body and the anxiety they feel when they don't feel like they are measuring up. He blames this anxiety and insecurity on the steroid fueled "cult of masculinity" that drives not just the "circuit" scene where it reins supreme but the gay aesthetic in general.

Meanwhile, in straight America, even masculine men had pretty ordinary bodies until the late 1970's. Think back to Batman and Superman of the 1970's. They would be scoffed at as wimps today. Earlier stars like Humphrey Bogart, Gregory Peck and Clark Gable didn't go to the gym everyday. Even boy's "dolls" have changed to conform to the more pumped up version of the masculine norm. The GI Joe, Luke Skywalker, and Hans Solo dolls of the 1970's are scrawny toothpicks compared to their more recent counterparts.

It's only been in the last ten years that men's obsession with how they measure up has come to the public's attention. In 1997, *The Full Monty,* a British movie about a group of unemployed men who form a male striptease act as a way to make money, may well be the first movie to bring attention to the insecurity men feel about their bodies. In a touching scene, one of the central characters, Dave, admits to his wife that he's been practicing for a strip routine. Pointing to his belly, he tells her that he's not going through with it because, "who would want to look at this?" His shame in this scene is palpable. Since then several books have focused on male body obsession. *The Adonis Complex* is the most well known and more frequently cited of these books. Through interviews with hundreds of men (most of whom identify as straight), the authors show how the quest for the perfect body drives many men to use steroids, exercise compulsively, develop eating disorders and/or body dysmorphic disorder – a condition in

which normal looking people feel that they are so unspeakably hideous that they can't interact with others or function normally because they are afraid of being ridiculed or humiliated based on their appearance.

Later research suggests that the impact of the media on men's self-esteem (gay and straight) is similar to the impact of the media on women's self-esteem***. Men who look at fitness magazines have higher levels of body dissatisfaction than men who don't. What's different for gay men is that they are more likely to experience anxiety about their appearance as a result of watching porn and are more likely to obsess about what they eat than their heterosexual counterparts.

Just as women's obsession with beauty stems from their lower position on the social hierarchy, male body obsession stems from the male pecking order. It's no wonder that men started getting bigger and buffer just as women started making inroads into the traditional houses of male power. To count in the world of men, you must constantly prove your masculinity. There are numerous ways to do this: physical force, sexual conquest of women, and financial success. At some level, all of these factors have gotten interwoven with the quest for the perfect body. At some level, a lean, sculpted, muscular body epitomizes male strength. Similarly, many men believe that in order to score, they have to have, if not a perfect, then at least a good enough body. Finally, while some men achieve the perfect body without effort, for most men have to spend hours at the gym and pay at least some attention to their diet and/or take a variety of supplements. .

The fear immasculinization seems to be especially potent among gay men. In a 1996 episode of *This American Life*, syndicated sex columnist Dan Savage argues that fear of sissyness is really the underlying agent of homophobia. He argues that this stems from the fact that gay men violate the gender rules. To be a sissy is to be like a girl, which is the worse thing a boy or man can be. As a consequence, many men don't even want to be seen with a "sissy." This is especially clear in the qualifiers many men seeking men put in their personal ads: "No sissies," and "straight acting/ straight appearing." The message is clear: girly boys need not apply. (Savage actually stands up for sissies, arguing that it takes an incredible amount of guts to be a sissy.)

 You Have Nothing to Lose but Your Chains

Whether you identify as lesbian, straight, gay, bisexual, or transgendered, the culture has probably screwed up your sense of self based on how you perceive your body image. What can you do?

First, acknowledge the impact the culture has on your self-identity. Awareness is the first step to change. Most of us have no clue that many of the behaviors we engage in are due to the oppressive power of culture. I remember talking to a friend on the phone once who was in complete denial that the fact that she shaved her legs twice a day had anything to do with or culture's obsession with hairlessness for women. This doesn't mean you have to stop shaving. It just means that it's important to make the choice about shaving and acknowledge why you are doing it.

Second, find ways to accept yourself as you are. The reality is that you are a beautiful being who deserves love and life. I remember my amazement at looking at a book of sketches by an elderly woman who sketched her and her husband naked. At the time, I thought that I was repulsed by "old bodies." But her sketches inspired me. They brought back the humanity and beauty of the aging body. If you let go of those horribly confining parameters of our culture, you will find a much broader sense of beauty. As a consequence of that book, I have come to see beauty in those moments of total authenticity. Those moments we capture so often with children when they don't know that they are being watched and they laugh or cry or rage or express whatever is up for them. If you can't do this on your own, find supportive people in your life or a supportive counselor/therapist who can help you. Ironically, nothing seems to change until we accept what is.

Third, figure out how your obsession with the perfect body serves you. What feelings, insecurities and experiences does obsessing about how you measure up help you avoid? This can lead you into painful territories. It may be helpful to have an incredibly supportive friend or therapist at your side to physically or metaphorically hold your hand while you look into this.

 Finally, (and probably most difficult) trust your body and be gentle with it. We live in a culture that ignores and denies the body. It encourages us to eat when we are not hungry and not eat when we are. Your body holds a great deal of wisdom. Find ways to trust it. Many people find Buddhist meditation practices and/or yoga to be helpful in this way. Yoga especially can help you be present in your body.

*"Queer Reflections: Lesbian and Bisexual Women Discuss Body Image." *HUES*. 1998.

**Encyclopedia of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender history in America.

***Duggan, Scott and McCreary, Donald R. 2004. "Body Image, Eating Disorders, and the Drive for Muscularity in Gay and Heterosexual Men: The Influence of Media Images." *Journal of Homosexuality*. 47: 3 /4 pp 45-58.

Originally appeared in Outlook Weekly