Body Work

The Social Construction of Women's Body Image

Sylvia Blood

Also available as a printed book see title verso for ISBN details
Reassessing experimental psychology from a critical perspective, Sylvia Blood demonstrates how its research into Body Image can be misused and prone to misuse. Classifying women who experience distress and anxiety with food, eating and body size as suffering ‘body image disturbance’ or ‘body image dissatisfaction’, it can reproduce dominant assumptions about language, meaning and subjectivity. Experimental psychology’s discourse about body image has recently become more widely influential, becoming popularised through domains such as women’s magazines, in which psychological experts provide ‘facts’ about women’s ‘body image problems’, and offer advice and psychological treatments. With acute cross-disciplinary awareness Body Work: The Social Construction of Women’s Body Image exposes the assumptions at work in the methods and status of experimental approaches. Penetrating beyond the usual dichotomy between experimental and popular psychology, this book illuminates some of the ways in which women’s magazines have embraced experimental psychology’s treatment of the issue. Drawing on her experience in clinical psychology, Sylvia Blood highlights the damaging effects of uncritically experimental views of body image. She goes on to elaborate not only an alternative model of discursive construction but also the implications of such a theory for clinical practice.

Merging theory and clinical experience, Sylvia Blood exposes the fallacies about women’s bodies that underpin experimental psychology’s body image research. She demonstrates the dangerous consequences of these fallacies being accepted as truths in popular texts and in the talk of ‘everyday’ women.

Sylvia Blood is a Clinical Psychologist who has been in private practice for over fifteen years. She has a particular interest in working with women who experience distress with their bodies and eating.
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BODY WORK

The social construction of women’s body image

Sylvia K. Blood
FOR SAM
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INTRODUCTION

Anita, a woman in her mid-40s, comes to see me. She is distressed. Crying, she tells me she is fat, that she hates her body and is deeply ashamed about the way she looks. Anita says she is always thinking about food and either restricting what she eats or eating ‘everything in sight’. She feels out of control around food. Anita believes that if she could just lose 14 lbs she would feel better about herself. Her body has been a source of distress for her since she was a young woman. She has dieted, without success, since she was 15 and says of her attempts to lose weight, ‘I am constantly failing at what is the most important thing in my life’. Later in the session I learn she is facing possible redundancy from her job, her elderly mother is unwell and she is having difficulties with her adolescent son. She is reluctant to talk about these things and appears anxious lest the focus of our talk shifts from her real problem, her body, to these other, lesser issues.

Ten years ago or even five, when women talked about being unhappy with their bodies and eating too much, a discourse of body-reduction through dieting dominated explanations for their difficulties. Women talked about the need to lose weight and to exert greater self-control around food. Failure to lose weight or to maintain weight loss was attributed to their lack of will-power. More recently, experimental psychology’s discourse of ‘body image problems’ has become an increasingly dominant explanation for women’s distressing experience of their bodies. Body image discourse supplies a disturbing vocabulary and narrative by which women are understood by others, and understand themselves, as women with a psychological problem of body image dissatisfaction or body image disturbance. These classifications provide answers for the body image experts and become common-sense knowledge about women’s painful and distressing experiences of their bodies.

Experimental psychology’s theories about body image have become accepted as ‘truths’, providing scientific explanations for women’s concern and distress about their bodies. These ‘truths’ impact upon women through a process of subjectification. Via popular women’s magazines, a discourse of body image problems is woven into the fabric of our everyday experience. The ‘truth’ about women’s body image problems is presented in a persuasive, compelling, plausible manner. Information about body image is presented to women as something all women
‘have’, as something that can be identified and measured according to scientific ‘norms’ and as something women should know and be concerned about. Women are encouraged to learn about body image, to learn about themselves. Self-scrutiny, confessions and public revelations of women’s bodies/subjectivities are actively encouraged in body image articles. The ‘findings’ of experimental psychology’s body image research, reproduced in popular women’s magazines, have damaging social implications for women’s lives, in particular, for the ways women can experience embodiment.

Within experimental psychology’s body image research, objective measurement is often held to be the route to knowledge about women’s bodies. The concept of ‘body image’ is based on fundamental epistemological assumptions about the nature of the mind, the body, the individual and society. A woman’s body is viewed as a biological object separate from the individual who perceives her body. It is assumed that a woman should be able to perceive her own body objectively and (more or less) accurately in the same way that she might perceive the dimensions of an inanimate object, such as a vase. Experimental procedures intensify and normalise a woman’s objectifying gaze of her body through asking her to focus her gaze on her body as an object and view her body as a series of measurements. A woman is considered to be normal if she can objectively perceive the size and shape of her body consistently over time. Women’s bodies can be known only through strict empirical measures of women’s reported cognitive and subjective states and by body width measurements. There is no space for inconsistency, contradiction or a shifting view of one’s body. The body, outside the social/cultural, is not invested with meanings, desire and an unconscious (e.g. Cash and Pruzinsky, 1990, 2002; Thompson and Smolak, 2001).

Body image discourse rests on a fundamental split between the individual and society. In experimental studies, society is operationalised as a variable influencing the minds of individual women. The notion of the individual in experimental psychology is predicated on the mind–body dualism and is constructed as objective and autonomous, a unitary, rational and consistent subject. Body image researchers take the view that something called ‘societal influence’ can be measured empirically and that some women are more ‘susceptible’ to, for example, media images of thin women, than others. Society is seen as an external force that works on the vulnerable minds of individual women.

One of the most damaging effects of body image discourse for women is that they are both blamed by society and blame themselves for their failure to resist societal influences and accept their bodies ‘as they really are’. Individual explanations for women’s difficulties are privileged over cultural explanations. There is no consideration that women’s painful experiences of their female bodies might be culturally produced.

Body image researchers assert that women’s painful feelings about their bodies are caused either by a perceptual problem – that is, women do not see their bodies ‘as they really are’ – or flaws in the way women think or what they feel – women have unrealistic expectations or distorted beliefs about the way their bodies look.
In this way, women’s distressing experiences of their bodies are reduced simply to a concern about physical appearance.

So where does this leave Anita? Is her perception of herself faulty? As a woman in her 40s who has given birth to three children, are her expectations of what she should look like simply unrealistic? Is she particularly vulnerable to the influence of societal representations of women in their mid-40s who look much younger? Does she need to ‘modify the “irrational expectations” regarding appearance that are “fostered by sociocultural factors”’? (Thompson, 1990: 105). Is her belief that her body is not acceptable due to a perceptual problem that prevents Anita from seeing her body objectively? Is it possible that Anita holds ‘common irrational beliefs regarding body size, weight and overall appearance’ (Thompson, Heinberg and Clarke, 2001: 314) which mean she is unable to think about her body rationally? Is Anita’s dissatisfaction with her body simply all in her mind?

This book exposes the fallacies about women’s bodies that underpin experimental psychology’s body image research. It demonstrates the dangerous consequences of these fallacies being accepted as truths in popular texts and in the talk of ‘everyday’ women who have experienced distress with their bodies and eating. All of the women I spoke with had struggled with feelings of despair about their body size and shape and experienced difficulties with food. Experimental psychology has made a significant contribution to this despair.

This critique of the assumptions of experimental psychology’s body image research and my argument for an alternative approach to understanding women’s difficult experiences of embodiment does not, of course, constitute the ‘real truth’ about women’s bodies. My own position is itself an historical artefact, equally contingent, that will in turn be critiqued.

The first chapter of this book provides a detailed description of experimental psychological research on body image, identifying key researchers, the psychological concepts and methods they use, and some of the assumptions underpinning their methods. A critique of this research, focusing on the potential effects of psychology’s constitution of women’s bodies in body image research, follows in Chapter 2. An alternative view of the body and subjectivity, as discursive products, is presented in Chapter 3. I draw upon diverse aspects of the work of Susie Orbach, Michel Foucault, Susan Bordo, Nikolas Rose, and Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter’s discourse analytic work to provide a theoretical framework within which to formulate an alternative understanding of many women’s difficult experiences of their bodies. Quotes from women whom I interviewed about ‘body image’ are reproduced in these first chapters to illustrate the variety and complexity of their experiences.

In the next three chapters I model alternative ways of approaching the question of ‘body image’ by exploring the construction of women’s bodies/subjectivities across different empirical sites. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on practices within which women’s bodies are formed in particular ways. My analysis of the More magazine article featuring ‘ordinary’ women’s bodies naked is the subject of a descriptive form of discourse analysis in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5 a closer reading and a more
detailed analytic approach is used to examine how practices of subjectification, within body image discourse, in the broader context of popular women’s magazines, produce women as having body image problems.

My interview/discussion with one woman (Emma) about ‘body image’ forms the basis of Chapter 6. I use a discourse analytic approach to explore how Emma’s account underlines the ways in which assumptions of experimental body image research constitute her subjectivity in particular ways and discuss the effects of this constitution.

Finally, I consider the implications of my arguments for clinical practice and how, given this critical perspective, we can work with women who have difficulties with eating and who experience their bodies as a source of distress.
EXPERIMENTAL BODY IMAGE RESEARCH

Approaching the experimental body image literature, the sheer weight of knowledge at first seems both overwhelming and impenetrable. The experimental body image literature describes hundreds of controlled experiments, producing empirical evidence about body image and women's body image problems. A closer examination of this research reveals that its knowledge claims about women's bodies are mainly based on fundamental assumptions that are problematic for the women whom body image researchers would claim to be helping.

The phrase ‘body image research’ misleadingly suggests a comprehensive body of work founded on agreed-upon ontological and epistemological assumptions. In fact, definitions of body image vary greatly and stem from a range of different theoretical orientations, including phenomenology, neurology, experimental psychology, psychoanalysis and feminist philosophy. The focus of my work is on the effect of one important segment of this varied research - the use of the concept of body image in experimental psychology. My interest in this area of body image work stems from its significant social and cultural influence. I argue that scientific psychology’s conceptualisation of body image and its ‘disturbances’ powerfully informs - indeed, forms - contemporary common-sense and popular understandings of the body.

The aim of this chapter is to provide a detailed description of a representative selection of experimental psychological research on body image, identifying key researchers, the psychological concepts and methods they utilise, and some of the assumptions underpinning their methods. A critique of this research follows in Chapter 2, which focuses on the potential effects of psychology’s constitution of women’s bodies in body image research.

Historical precursors

One of the first academic psychologists to investigate body image and body perception was the North American psychologist Seymour Fisher (Fisher and Cleveland, 1958). Although only Fisher’s more recent (1986) work is cited by contemporary experimental researchers, his writings about body image span four decades. Fisher’s stance is an unusual mix of a psychoanalytic (Freudian) view of body image combined with a commitment to experimentally validated knowledge.
Fisher chastised his contemporaries from the late 1950s onwards, particularly behavioural psychologists, for only paying ‘lip-service to the fact that each person is a biological object’ and therefore ‘regarding people as disembodied’ (Fisher, 1986: xiii). For him, understanding human behaviour depended upon knowledge about ‘body perception’ – people’s feelings and attitudes towards their bodies: ‘I firmly believe we will eventually find that measures of body perception are among our most versatile predictors of how people will interpret and react to life situations’ (Fisher, 1986: xii).

In 1969 Franklin Shontz, anticipating some of the themes of current research, published a series of studies about body-size judgements. He noted that generally people are less accurate in perceiving the width of their own bodies or body parts than the size of ‘non-body objects’. Shontz, like Fisher, considered that the perception of body size was important to experimental psychology. Like Fisher, he also assumed the body was an object, objectively separate from the person doing the judging and able potentially to be perceived in the same way as objects that are not bodies.

Shontz asserted that there are measurable (gender-differentiated) ‘patterns of over- and under-estimation’ that apply to specific areas of the body. He claimed that women usually overestimate the width of their waists more than men do. He attributed this ‘mistake’ to women’s ‘concern over conforming to American standards of feminine beauty, which required a small waist as strongly as they do an ample bust’ (Shontz, 1969; cited in Fisher, 1986: 163).

Prior to Fisher’s work, Sidney Secord and Paul Jourard (1953), working in personality theory, emphasised ‘the individual’s attitudes towards his body’ as being of ‘crucial importance to any comprehensive theory of personality’ (Secord and Jourard, 1953: 343). These researchers believed that the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one’s body was quantifiable as ‘body-cathexis’. They produced ‘The Body Cathexis Scale’ in order to measure it. Almost a half century later, the scale is still used in experimental body image research to ‘. . . assess the more complex representations of physical appearance’ (Thompson, 1990: 15). Secord and Jourard tied body cathexis to self-concept, claiming that ‘valuation of the body and the self tend to be commensurate’ (Secord and Jourard, 1953: 346). Low scores for body cathexis were linked with negative personality traits.

In a seminal study of body perception within experimental psychology, Traub and Orbach (1964) investigated visual perception of the physical appearance of the body. They designed an adjustable full-length mirror which could ‘reflect the body of the observer on a distortion continuum ranging from extremely distorted to completely undistorted’. The task for the subject was to adjust his/her reflection until it ‘appears undistorted’ or ‘. . . so that it looks just like you’. Traub and Orbach were concerned with the distorting effects of the mind on perception, or the ‘confounding of direct perception of the physical appearance of the body with those thoughts, images, attitudes and affects regarding the body’ (Traub and Orbach, 1964: 65). The implicit assumption in these studies was that the mind should ideally be able to perceive the objective body more or less accurately.
There are several epistemological features of the work of these early researchers worth highlighting, since they introduce themes and a framework for understanding the notion of ‘body image’ which has provided the foundation for recent psychological research. The body is viewed as an object of perception objectively separate from the mind of the person doing the perceiving. It is assumed that the body can be perceived accurately or inaccurately. Failure to ‘accurately’ perceive one’s body ‘as it really is’ is understood to be the result of a perceptual or cognitive disturbance within the individual. Implicit in this analysis is the idea of the norm. It is assumed that there is a ‘correct’ way of perceiving the body, and that failure to do so is indicative of pathology, specifically a ‘disturbance’ in ‘body image’.

**Body image disturbance and the place of perception**

The work of German psychiatrist Hilde Bruch in 1962, on eating disorders, had the effect in the following decades of focusing body image research on disturbance. Bruch worked predominantly with young women diagnosed with anorexia nervosa. Her observations led her to conclude that ‘What is pathognomic of anorexia nervosa is not the severity of the malnutrition per se . . . but rather the distortion in body image associated with it: the absence of concern about emaciation’ (Bruch, 1962: 189). Bruch hypothesised an underlying perceptual ‘disturbance’ which meant that anorexic girls saw their ‘gruesome appearance’ as ‘normal or right’ (Bruch, 1962: 187). She asserted that there was ‘a disturbance in body image of delusional proportions’ present in all patients, which she regarded as an important diagnostic and prognostic sign of anorexia nervosa (Bruch, 1962: 191).

The main significance of Bruch’s work for experimental body image research is her influence on researchers such as Slade and Russell. These researchers, whose work became widely cited in this field, aimed to link perception of body size with eating disorders. In 1973 they carried out a series of studies of ‘the psychopathology of anorexia nervosa’. They considered the research to be important not only in establishing the diagnosis of anorexia nervosa but also in elucidating ‘the pathogenesis of this puzzling illness’ (Slade and Russell, 1973: 188).

Slade and Russell’s emphasis on objective experimental methodology reinforced this approach as crucial to doing body image research. Twenty-five years later, others such as Thompson (1990) have been explicit:

> In recent years, attempts have been made to manipulate variables in the laboratory and measure the effects on body image indices. These laboratory models of disturbance are of critical importance to the body image field because they demonstrate with the strictest empirical controls the factors that may operate in natural settings to cause body image disturbance.

(Thompson, 1990: 51–2)
As Slade and Russell’s work epitomises research with such ‘strict empirical controls’ – an approach which has come to almost completely dominate the research area – it is worth describing their experimental method in detail.

The aim of Slade and Russell’s first study (1973) was to try to measure how women with anorexia nervosa perceive their body size. Their study compared 14 anorexic patients with 20 ‘normal female controls’, mainly postgraduate psychology students, to test the hypothesis that the anorexic patients would significantly overestimate their size in relation to the control group. Slade and Russell’s ‘objective method . . . for measuring body image perception’ was ‘the size estimation task’ (Slade and Russell, 1973: 190). This task involved the subjects estimating the width across four parts of their body; the face, the chest, the waist at the narrowest point and the hips at the widest point. These measures of ‘perceived size’ were obtained by a ‘visual size estimation apparatus’, which consisted of a movable horizontal bar mounted on a stand. Two lights attached to runners were mounted on tracks set into the horizontal bar. A pulley-device was set up so that when one of the lights was moved outwards (or inwards) from a central point, the other light moved outwards (or inwards) in the opposite direction by the same amount. At the rear of the horizontal bar a measuring instrument was attached, so that the distance between the lights could be noted. Measures of ‘real size’ of the women’s bodies were ascertained by the use of an anthropometer – a body-measuring device. The experiments took place in a darkened experimental room and at no time was the subject informed of the results of her estimates. The measurements were obtained from the subjects while wearing their normal clothes ‘. . . in order to provide the most natural situation for studying body image perception’ (Slade and Russell, 1973: 190).

After gathering the data from the 34 subjects, Slade and Russell devised a formula referred to as the ‘body-image perception index’ (BPI), which they calculated as follows:

\[
\text{body image index} = \frac{\text{perceived size} \times 100}{\text{real size}}
\]

Using this index, a value of 100 corresponds to ‘accurate perception’ of body size. A value of less than 100 shows that physical size is underestimated, and a value greater than 100 shows that physical size is overestimated.

Slade and Russell used the mean indices (BPI) for the two groups of women in this study to claim that ‘while normal women tend to be remarkably accurate in their body-size estimations, patients with anorexia nervosa exhibit fairly large distortions’ (Slade and Russell, 1973: 192). The authors interpreted overestimation of body width on this task as evidence of ‘body image distortion’. Further, Slade and Russell noted that the four perception indices for both groups of subjects showed positive and significant intercorrelations. They claimed as a result that ‘. . . there is a general factor of body image perception which is observable in both anorexic patients and normals’ (Slade and Russell, 1973: 191–2). Their research concretised
body image perception' as a construct which could be both observed and measured, and could indicate some pathology.

Slade and Russell (1973: 192) also investigated the association between 'body width perception' and 'perception of non-body objects'. This experiment was based on the assumption that 'women's bodies' are a stable entity, similar to other inanimate objects. The aim of the experiment was to ascertain whether the (in)ability of individual women accurately to estimate the width of their bodies extended to estimations of the width of non-body objects. If a woman was able accurately to perceive the width of non-body objects (e.g. a vase) then her inability objectively to perceive the width of her own body could not be explained by a 'general perceptual disturbance' (Slade and Russell, 1973: 193).

According to Slade and Russell, anorexic women did not over-estimate the sizes of non-body objects (10 inch and 5 inch wooden blocks) but they 'misperceived' their own body size. Consequently, they claimed that their studies were in line with Bruch's description of body image as part of the psychopathology of anorexia nervosa. They argued that they had provided 'a simple means of identifying and measuring this perceptual disturbance'. They had offered '... understandings of the causation of anorexia nervosa [and] the pathological mechanisms operating in this illness' (Slade and Russell, 1973: 197).

Slade and Russell's (1973) claim to have identified 'a general factor of body image perception' and a way of measuring it encouraged further experimental research into body size perception, particularly with groups of women diagnosed as 'eating-disordered'. The notion of a 'perceptual disturbance' as the cause of 'body image disturbance' was uncritically accepted and much of the research that followed focused on inventing methods that would measure that disturbance.

Slade and Russell noted that the concept of body image was 'vague and ill-defined'. The definition they used, still in use today (see e.g. Slade, 1994), was taken from Paul Schilder, the German neuropsychologist, whom they quoted as saying that body image is 'the picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say, the way in which the body appears to ourselves' (Schilder, 1935: 11; cited in Slade and Russell, 1973: 189).

Their selective use of Schilder's work omits central features of his complex, theoretical model of the body image. Schilder's conception of the body image owed more to psychoanalysis than neurophysiology. Freud's work was an important influence, in particular his conception of libidinal energy and drives. For Schilder, social and interpersonal attachments and investments, as well as libidinal energy, shape a person's self-image and conception of the body. Far from using an isolated image of the body, such as that employed by Slade and Russell (where a lone body is perceived within a 'blank' experimental space), Schilder's model involves the relations between the body, the space surrounding it, other objects and other bodies. In his model the body image 'is formed out of the various modes of contact the subject has with its environment through its actions in the world' (Grosz, 1994: 85). In 'borrowing' one aspect of Schilder's concept, Slade and Russell reduced his theory of the body image to a simple asocial mental representation of the body.