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Social Construction of Deviance: Male Body Image

Joseph Varanese

The study of body image is an extremely broad topic that touches upon many subjects including gender. However, the study of body image has been portrayed in the academic world as extremely one sided, with an emphasis on females. The same level of consideration has not been extended to males. This is an issue because of the fact that males are subject to a higher level of societal scrutiny. This is due to an unchanging virtual social identity which has been compacted over centuries, beginning in Ancient Greece and the Renaissance, and expanding exponentially in the modern era. As a result of this, the stereotypes attributed to men become a form of hegemonic masculinity. This can be shown as a trend throughout cultural products such as art in history as well as in media in the modern age. Failing to meet the societal expectations of being a muscular male leads to a gaping separation between virtual and actual social identity, causing stigma.

Symbolic interactionism, specifically Erving Goffman's Stigma Theory, will assist in explaining the issues surrounding male body image. Symbolic interactionism is pertinent to the discussion of body image as the 'correct' male body and is dictated to men through objects classified as symbols and men may internalize the meanings attributed to these symbols (Bereska, 2011). This discussion will have elements of history attached to it in order to express the fact that stereotypes of men have been present and prescribed to men throughout time. A stereotype is a quality that is attributed to some group that is perceived as normal, which is a similar to Goffman's (Smith, 2006) concept of virtual social identity. This identity explains that people identify others based off of a primary interaction, and as a result expect the person subsequent corresponding characteristics (Smith, 2006). For the purpose of this discussion the group involved are men, and the 'normal' attribute will be lean muscularity. Goffman's views on identities are also relevant because his theory outlines the results of men's failure to comply with

the standards desired of them-attaining a stigma. The stigma is the product of a negative disparity between one's virtual social identity (essentially the stereotype one should identify with) and their actual social identity (which refers to the definite characteristics that one has) (Smith, 2006). And while Goffman (Smith, 2006) identifies several stigmas, only 'physical deformities' or more broadly, the body, will be discussed regarding the lack of muscularity on the male body.

Before addressing the historical epochs, the differences between the male and female body image will be discussed. The reason why men face a higher level of societal scrutiny in comparison to females is because, as will be shown through the content of this essay, the gender scripts regarding males have stayed constant. Males have always been expected to be physically larger than the other gender. Yet, "fewer studies have examined the evolution of society's ideal for the male body" (Leit, Pope & Gray, 2001). Conversely, females have had different virtual social identities attributed to them over time; this can be shown through art as well. From the full-bodied imagery in the renaissance to the thin supermodel ideal in the modern age it is clear that something has changed. What makes the male struggle much more prominent is that the prescription for lean muscularity has been compounded, leading to a definite identity that is unlikely to dissipate.

Ancient Greece is a clear example of a society in which males have faced extreme prescriptions about appearance. Dictating what was acceptable in this time was the moral entrepreneur of religion; the polytheistic Greek religion was highly based on patriarchy and placed emphasis on the male ideal through the portrayal of the male gods. Religious statues commissioned by artists of the day portrayed males with a muscular athletic body. It is clear in this time that "to show a [naked] male was certainly...to claim the athletic body as the model of all it was to be a man" (Osborne, 1997).

Apollo fits this typology perfectly as he is often portrayed through literature and images as the ideal man. Through depictions of the god Apollo, it is clear that he was portrayed as a handsome muscular man; broad chest, prominent 'Adonis belt' and extremely visible abdominal muscles. This argument would not gain conviction if a sole god was characterized this way; however, the majority of Athenian Gods and men were portrayed in the nude with highly sexualized characteristics (Osborne, 1997). Goffman would claim that due to these depictions, the virtual social identity attributed to Greek men was based on being muscular and overtly 'godlike.' Due to the lack of documentation of body satisfaction at this time, it would be impossible to understand how men attributed meaning to body image and it would be impossible to conclude how those faced with a stigma would react or how they would be viewed. However, The Greeks have documentation regarding a god, Hephaestus, who did not comply with the ideal standards. Through symbolic interactionism it is clear that the negative depiction of Hephaestus would act as a marker of what would happen to humans who did not meet the saintly criteria. The average man would be able to attribute meanings of seclusion and isolation to the story.

Hephaestus, or the Lame God, was born disabled and thrown off Olympus at birth by his mother, Hera, as a result. He was often depicted in a wheelchair, causing him to be in the lowest strata on Olympus. This can be expressed by the fact that he is the only god who is responsible for the menial work on the Olympus; he constructs armour and performs metal work as he has to essentially 'earn' his place on Olympus (Harris & Platzner, 2011). He is also further humiliated when his wife, Aphrodite, has sexual relations with another god Ares, in his own bed (Harris & Platzner, 2011).

Analyzing this from a symbolic interactionist point of view, it would be apparent that the Greeks were told that if they did not conform to the view of the muscular able-bodied Zeus, they

would be likened to Hephaestus, a god that was frowned upon by other Olympians and had to work to reclaim his birthright. Goffman would argue that men who were likened to Hephaestus would feel shame, as they take on an actual social identity far from that of the ideal virtual social identity; they would, in Goffman's (Smith, 2006) terms have a discredited stigma (a stigma visible to all).

Building on the male ideal, the classical period also produced *Doryphoros*. A statue by the artist Polyclitus exemplifies the ideal male through his personal canon, muscular with a concentration on proportion and symmetry (Polyclitus, 2012). This statue is the precursor of Leonardo Da Vinci's renaissance creation- *The Vitruvian Man*. What is alarming about this 'symbol' of the ideal man is the fact that Da Vinci notes explicitly what the perfect man is using ratios learned from a roman architect named Vitruvius (Heydenreich, 2012). Da Vinci's emphasis on symmetry is shocking as it objectifies the male body in a time when emphasis was placed on the mind rather than the physical, reiterating the fact that physicality and masculinity are mutually inclusive. Coupling this discussion with reference once again to *Doryphoros*, it is clear that the the virtual social identity of the man has stayed constant throughout centuries, as shaped by artists who could be considered the original moral entrepreneurs of the male body.

Michelangelo also expresses the importance of muscularity in his works. His works featured extremely muscular men, clearly shown through *The Statue of David*. *The Statue of David* showcases the biblical figure in a similar way that the Greek hero was portrayed in sculpture; a muscular fighter, or as a "giant of a man, virile and muscular, passionate and determined" (Fulton, 1997). What is so damaging about Michelangelo is that through his work he "created the single most visible, culturally authorized icon of male beauty..." (Frontain, 2006). However, it was not only Michelangelo that replicated this biblical figure, Caravaggio and

Donatello did the same. As a result, this trifecta is viewed as allowing *David* to enter “the Western world's cultural lexicon as a synonym for male beauty” (Frontain, 2006).

The meanings and implications associated with a definitive drawing on the perfect ‘average’ man through the *Vitruvian Man*, and *The Statue of David* would give men the impression that this is a standard they need to meet; being unable to do so would literally result in failure. As well, the multiple creations of *David*, a biblical figure, also tie muscularity and the male body into the realm of religion – making it a moral entrepreneur.

While Ancient Greece and the Renaissance were periods that occurred in the far past, their emphasis on the muscular man has translated into cultural products today. While there is less reverence for artists, sculptors, and literature about mythical gods, modern culture worships the media and as a result it has become one of the largest contributors to manufacturing the social construction of weight. This is because “sociocultural standards of beauty for males emphasize strength and muscularity” (Labre, 2002).

Today, one of the most influential mediums that convey messages about the male body would be movies. Movies constantly portray men as the ‘alpha’ male – whether it is romantic comedies marketed towards females, or action movies marketed towards males. Content analyses of ‘male’ movies have proven that “central characters were overwhelmingly muscular and lean” (Morrison & Halton, 2009). As identified by Goffman (Alexander, 2003), after viewing ‘male’ centered movies men would engage in gender mimicking, feeling the need to participate in the culture of muscularity. Essentially men are trying to create a body that complies with the stereotype because it is what they see around them. Furthering the symbolic interactionist viewpoint, research points out that characteristics that deviate from the muscular ideal are

negative and viewers may “normalise the message that being non-muscular is bad” (Morrison & Halton, 2009), thus contributing to the muscular stereotype.

This theoretical viewpoint would also be supported by the fact that comedy movies are recorded as the second most popular genre among males next to action (Morrison & Halton, 2009). This is upsetting not because of the order of genre preference, but rather the characters within the type of genre. Action movies portray men who are fit such as in the *A-Team*, *Mission Impossible*, and *James Bond* and portray “muscularity in a positive manner” (Morrison & Halton, 2009). Conversely, comedies portray seemingly overweight or non-muscular individuals, clear in movies such as *Superbad*, *The Hangover*, and *Run Fat Boy Run*. This causes men and women to attribute comedic principles to men who don’t comply with the ‘action’ male, further leading to a hegemonic male identity and the consequence of non compliance being attributed with comedic characteristics.

What may be more alarming is the collection of prominent and accessible magazines that discuss the male body. Found in convenience stores, big box stores, newsstands and in the home, magazines are one of the most explicit actors in the muscular male movement. *Men’s Health*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, and *Details* are all examples of these magazines. *Men’s Health*, however, has been analyzed and criticized multiple times for its body prescriptions. As Susan Alexander (2003) notes, one hundred percent of *Men’s Health* covers address the theme of having a ‘hard body,’ with the majority of cover pictures relaying the message through portrayals of men with evident lean muscles. Extremely relevant to the discussion of a compounded male identity, or muscular stereotype, Alexander (2003) points out that *Men’s Health* has actually featured a main article explicitly telling men what to include in their workout regime to resemble *Doryphoros*. This

clearly exemplifies the fact that Philokleites' proportions and ideal created over one thousand years ago, is still relevant and expected in the modern age.

Another type of magazine that is pertinent to this discussion, albeit the issues of morality involved, is the pornographic magazine-specifically *Playgirl*. The pornographic magazine with depictions of nude men is the complement to the *Playboy* magazine. *Playgirl* is a relevant component of this discussion. since in the modern era pornography essentially acts as the showcase of the naked male body (like the sculptures in Ancient Greece). This is due to the fact that pornography is essentially the only place where one can see modern depictions of the naked body. Leit, Pope, and Gray (2001) explain that the ideal male body has become increasingly muscular since 1973 as shown through *Playgirl* centerfolds. As well, due to the nature of the *Playgirl* magazine, it suggests that men with muscles are the objects of lust and desire. This, coupled with the evident fact that lean muscularity has been a trait attributed to men since the time of Ancient Greece, expresses that the drive for muscularity is becoming more widespread in society and it also has implications in the realm of sexuality.

Another cultural artifact that is relevant to magazines and movies would be advertisements. Advertisements are a marketing tool used to push products, and often towards a certain gender. The most relevant type of advertisement for discussion of male body image would be advertisements about male products in male magazines. Within advertisements, "the majority of men have the physique of the traditional male icon – strong and muscular" (Kolbe & Albanese, 1996). Kolbe and Albanese (1996) also discuss the fact that this image is not in tune with actual values and is in fact a stereotype. The pair also references Goffman's work on *Gender Advertisements*, explaining that advertisements "subtly communicate information about social identity, intentions, expectations, moods, and an individual's physical image" (Kolbe &

Albanese, 1996). Coupling the findings of the study and Goffman's thesis, it is evident that the media is a moral entrepreneur of male body image as they are communicating societal expectations of males.

After an analysis of the virtual social identity of the man over time, it is evident that those who do not comply with the lean muscular identity are those who are labelled deviant in society. However, what this analysis of history has not produced is a subjective understanding of how failures to meet the male ideals as expected through the cultural products in society have affected those who have faced the stigma. Fortunately for this discussion, the academic world has cited and explained the results of dealing with the stigma of being 'un-muscular,' or more broadly 'unmanly' in the modern day.

The main issue with males who are trying to lessen their stigma is that in many occurrences they try to attain the ideal body, which in the modern perspective has been attributed to extreme measures. As Labre (2002) points out that during adolescents, people of all genders reported lower body satisfaction. Labre (2002) also explains that male students try to rid themselves of this dissatisfaction by engaging in the use of drugs (anabolic steroids), or coping with it through the development of an eating disorder. Additionally, "depression, measures of eating pathology...and low self-esteem" (Olivardia, Pope, Borowiecki, & Cohane 2004,) are noted as a result of body dissatisfaction among college age men. With this information present, it is evident that there are serious issues associated with such a hegemonic male virtual social identity.

It is because of this that the muscular stereotype and virtual social identity of men must end, given that noncompliance with the ideal causes a stigma that clearly has adverse affects on

its victim's health. However, many would have doubts about ending the ideal given that its roots are entrenched in world history. Analyzing this issue from a symbolic interactionist perspective, it makes sense to delve into the root of the problem utilising symbolic interactionism as a tool. Based on the principles of meaning and subjectivism, it is evident that education regarding the issue needs to concentrate on the meaning that men have attributed to the symbols surrounding them. The issue should be addressed in schools, helping males before they become aware and re-institute the hegemonic ideal into their own lives. They need to be made aware that masculinity, and the health and portrayals associated with it, are not physical – 'healthy' should be the conquering virtual social identity in this battle as health is essential to life, and is essential to more than just masculinity. In addition to this, for the older generation of men, those who are not in the school system, media and broadcasting companies should make it more evident to be a critical consumer of what they are viewing and producing. While it would be difficult to do this, it is clear that the stigma relating to male body image could be completely eliminated by an outside force (i.e. a change in social ideology) rather than personal strain (such as using steroids).

Ancient Greece, the Renaissance, and the present day, while separated by space and time, all share the common hegemonic male virtual social identity – that is, muscularity. As expressed through forms of cultural products, it is evident that the male ideal, as enforced through moral entrepreneurs, is essential to being a man. Failure to identify with this ideal leads to what Erving Goffman (Smith, 2006) calls 'stigma.' Akin to Goffman, Blumer points out: "gender is a doing" (Smith, 2006). As shown through history, being male means being buff, yet this ideology is far from being morally correct or ideal, and as a result needs to end.

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