**A Gender & Cultural Studies Perspective on body image: Evidence, Understanding & Policy**

***Report to Jo Swinson Minister for Women and Equalities: Current Stage of research on body image.***

***Dr Sarah Riley, Department of Psychology, Aberystwyth University*** ***email: scr2@aber.ac.uk***

**Executive summary**: Gender and cultural studies conceptualises body image as a) located in it socio-historic context and structured by contemporary discourses of personhood that create a judgemental culture in which a person’s body weight may be read as evidence of health and morality; and b) as a dynamic process that often occurs in interaction. This perspective suggests that interventions should target the social nature of body image problems and develop collective resistance to the negative aspects of wider discourses of personhood.

**1. Conceptualising the issue:**

Body image research tends to conceptualise body image problems and their attendant solutions at the individual level. From this perspective body image is conceptualised as a fixed aspect of a person and interventions are aimed at countering the 'problem' in the individual (Blood, 2005). For example, there are calls for training to help young women be more critical of media (Lamb & Peterson, 2011), to encourage individuals to focus on 'health' not appearance (APPGBI, 2010), or to identify those more vulnerable to media influence or body image problems (Burrowes, 2013). A gender and cultural studies perspective suggests something different: to conceptualise body image as a social process, located not in the individual but a dynamic between individuals and between individuals and their social and cultural context. This perspective draws on a social constructionist understanding of identity, in which people are only ever partially formed and produced through the sense making that characterises their socio-historic period (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2011). From this perspective understanding body image requires a) analyses of the contemporary discourses of personhood that people may draw on to make sense of themselves and their embodied identities and b) analyses of the social interactions that inform body image development (Gleeson & Frith, 2006; Riley et al., 2008).

**2. Method and Evidence**

Cultural and gender studies researchers usually employ qualitative and interpretative methods to analyse the discourses available to people and the consequences of making sense of oneself and others through these discourses. Most qualitative research is small scale with sample sizes of 30 or less, excluding it from reports that use size as a quality criterion. For example, the Government Equalities Office rapid assessment of the body image literature had the inclusion criteria of a minimum of 200 participants (Burrowes, 2013). However, as the Burrowes report argues, the correlational studies that dominate large-scale body image research have reduced efficacy in developing understanding on such a complex topic.

Reoccurring patterns in small scale qualitative work on body image suggest they offer an important contribution to evidence based policy (see for example, Malson & Burns, 2009; Riley, et al., 2008), particularly as in-depth qualitative research is able to holistically explore the complexities of everyday sense making and the wider cultural discourses that provide the conditions of possibility for this sense making. Qualitative work therefore offers answers to why people respond on questionnaires about body image in the way that they do. More radically, qualitative work may give us a perspective 'hidden' by the figures in quantitative work, since the individualism of quantitative body image work may mask an understanding of body image as social, context-dependent and dynamic.

**3. Understanding**

The gender and cultural studies perspective of locating body image in the social has the potential to develop understanding that can contribute to effective policy regarding body image. Research from this perspective contributes to understanding in two ways: analyses of public discourses and how they construct understandings of personhood; and analyses of how individuals talk about their body image.

Analyses of public discourses – ways of sense making that construct reality in particular ways - usually focus on media discourses and highlight four prevalent forms of sense making relevant to body image: neoliberalism, consumerism, postfeminism and healthism, these are discussed below.

Neoliberal rhetoric constructs citizenship as a person’s ability to manage themselves in ways that are beneficial to the government, by for example, reducing their need to draw on government funded resources such as healthcare (Miller & Rose, 2008). In relation to body image, neo-liberalism creates a cultural understanding that people are responsible for, and able to make rational decisions about, their health and weight. This level of responsibility requires a person to engage in self-scrutiny, in order to identify where work on the body is required and then carry out this work. Such body work is often enabled through the use of consumer products, and consumerism has played an important role in increasing normative expectations regarding what is appropriate body and beauty work (Riley & Scharff, 2012). For women, these escalating expectations have been fuelled by a postfeminist sentiment that equates femininity and female empowerment with consumer oriented beauty practices. Combined with an unprecedented media scrutiny of British women’s bodies, postfeminism, has created a climate in which British women learn to continuously scrutinise themselves and engage in beauty-work to facilitate their appearance. And for both sexes neoliberalism, consumerism and ‘healthism’ – the conflation of health with weight - create a context in which body size and shape may be read – and judged (Evans et al., 2010; Gill, 2006, 2008; Malson, 2008; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008).

A powerful and often painful lens is thus focused on the body, as it comes to represent so much of a person – their morality, citizenship, personality, attractiveness, and value; while absenting alternative ways of thinking about the body (such as a role for the unconscious in decision making, recognising the cultural contradictions around gratification that both encourage immediate satiety and control, and the significant commercial interests in directing behaviour towards the consumption of sugar, fat, body related products (including magazines and diet products) and a psychic investment in unattainable ideals.

Discourses associated with neoliberalism, consumerism, healthism and/or postfeminism are evident in analyses of how people make sense of their embodied and gendered identities. Healthism, for example, was a reoccurring motif in a study on young women’s experiences of school (Rich & Evans, 2006). Such analyses also highlight how body image is experienced as a dynamic process, produced in social interaction. For example, a study asking young women (16-20 years) when they felt conscious of their bodies elicited stories about the role of looks from others (Riley, et al., 2013; for examples of these stories see<http://digitalfictions.wordpress.com/>). This research suggests that body image may be better conceptualised as a social process occurring between people and highlights new directions for interventions that focus on the social as the point of change rather than the individual. For example, participants were facilitated to explore together how their collective stories about looks could be reframed in ways that increased their resilience in relation to body image concerns. Similarly, in a previous study, participants identified collective ways to resist ‘fat talk’ that were more effective than individual actions (Riley & Scharff, 2012).

**Policy implications**

Gender and cultural studies research offers compelling evidence that body image is a dynamic process, in which social interactions play a central part. These social interactions can be located in a wider discursive context that constructs body size as an individual responsibility, and which conflates weight and appearance with health and morality.

Conceptualising body image as a social process suggests that the site to address body image problems is also social. And there is evidence for the efficacy in socially oriented interventions. Examples include interventions to help people collaboratively ‘re-frame’ or prepare for problematic social interactions (Riley, 2013, see also the expected Welsh Government paper on appearance related bullying); collective peer led action research groups (e.g. Riley & Scharff, 2012; see also ‘The Unbeatables’ a female pupil organisation from Ysgol y Cymer who contributed to the Welsh Government’s domestic abuse policy); and actions that challenge rather than reproduce the discourses around neoliberalism, consumerism, healthism and/or postfeminism, see for example <http://www.healthateverysize.org.uk> . This report therefore concludes for the utility in further exploring possibilities of policy developed from a perspective that constructs body image as a discursivly contextualised social process.

**References**

APPGBI. (2012). *Reflections on body image*. All Party Parliamentary Group on Body Image <http://www.ymca.co.uk/bodyimage/report>

Blood, S.K. (2005). *Body work: The social construction of women’s body image*. London: Routledge.

Burr, V. (2003). *An introduction to social constructionism*. London: Routledge.

Burrowes, N. (2013). Body image – a rapid evidence assessment of the literature. Report for the Government Equalities Office.

Evans, A., Riley, S. & Shankar, A. (2010). Technologies of sexiness: Theorizing women’s engagement in the sexualisation of culture, *Feminism & Psychology*, 20 (1), 1-18.

Gergen, K. (2011). *The relational being.* Oxford*:* Oxford University Press

Gill, R. (2006). *Gender and the Media*. London: Polity Press.

Gill, R. (2008). Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Postfeminist Times. *Subjectivity, 25*, 432-445.

Gleeson, K. & Frith,H. (2006). (De)Constructing Body Image, *Journal of Health Psychology*, 11 (1), 79-90.

Lamb, S & Peterson, Z. D. (2011), Adolescent Girls’ Sexual Empowerment: Two Feminists Explore the Concept *Sex Roles* DOI 10.1007/s11199-011-9995-3

# Malson, H. (2008). Deconstructing un/healthy body weight and body management. In, Riley, S.C.E., Burns, M., Frith, H. & Markula, P. (Eds). *Critical bodies: Representations, Practices and Identities of Weight and Body Management*. London: Palgrave/MacMillan

# Malson, H. & Burns, M. (2009). *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*. London: Routledge.

Miller, P. & Rose, N. (2008). *Governing the present*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Rich, E. & Evans, J. (2006). Making Sense of Eating Disorders in Schools. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of* Education, [26](http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cdis20?open=26#vol_26) (2), 247-262

Riley, S. & Scharff, C. (2012) Feminism Vs femininity? Exploring feminist dilemmas through cooperative inquiry *research. Feminism & Psychology.* Published online before print August 27, 2012, doi: 10.1177/0959353512454615

Riley, S., Ensslin, A., Haran, J., Gong, Y and Mackiewicz, A. (2013). Using cooperative enquiry focus groups to facilitate body image resilience in young women: space, gaze and digital fictions. Paper presented at the International Society of Critical Health Psychologists Conference, Bradford, July 22-24th.

Riley, S.C.E., Burns, M., Frith, H. & Markula, P. (Eds). (2008). Critical bodies: Representations, Practices and Identities of Weight and Body Management. London: Palgrave/ MacMillan.

Ringrose, J. and Walkerdine, V. (2008). Regulating the abject. *Feminist Media Studies*, 8(3),

227–246.