

“More-or-less body”: the social perception of normativity of the body in Poland

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The article presents results of a study aimed at exploring social concepts associated with bodily ‘normativity’ and ‘passability’: the notion of normative body weight and attitude towards over- and underweight individuals. We were particularly interested in the common concepts and notions associated with normative body weight as well as possible reasons for rejection of people whose bodies do not fall within the socially shared knowledge of what the ‘right’ body is. The article presents results of a qualitative, interview-based research study conducted with the use of visual materials.

Key words: body, normativity, to pass, overweight, underweight, obesity, thinness

THE STUDY OF CULTURAL PERCEPTION OF THE BODY – INTRODUCTION

If we assume that the human body is a kind of “medium” and its symbolism constitutes a kind of socially shared “knowledge”, gaining access to this knowledge can tell us a lot about a given culture. A lot of attention is paid in every culture to such characteristics as the shape of the body, body proportions and weight. Every culture has its own ideal and instills the desirability of its realisation among its members.

In the circle of western European culture, which includes Poland, excess weight and being underweight are treated in a specific way. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the cultural ideal of health and beauty has become a slim figure, in which all unnecessary fat is eliminated (Brevis 2011: 86). This bodily ideal has also become a benchmark for social perception of bodily normativity.

The main notion used in our paper is the notion of “normativity” understood broadly as “fitting into social norms”. We treat “normativity” as a kind of continuum, of which obesity and extreme thinness are two opposite ends; for both obesity and extreme thinness can be interpreted as a kind of failure to present society with a body which meets social expectations. In this context, both obesity and extreme thinness violate the social norms regulating the presentation

of acceptable body image and express a lack of one's control over the body. Sander L. Gilman coined the term 'to pass' in order to indicate the moment in which an individual arrives at a social acceptance of their personal appearance by the rest of the society. Referring to obesity and thinness Gilman wrote:

"The problem with this is that beauty is culturally constituted, and so that which made you (in)visible in one generation or in one place marks you as visible in another. Each physical category must be so constructed that it has a clearly defined, unambiguous antithesis <...>. What remains constant is the idea that the external body (with whatever qualities are ascribed to it) reflects the values of the soul. To 'pass' one must be able to move from a negative category to a positive one" (See: 2001: 21–24).

THE STUDY OF CULTURAL ASPECTS OF 'NORMATIVITY' OF BODY WEIGHT – RESEARCH NEEDS

The reason for designing and conducting our study was the fact that the available research results did not cover the aspects of normativity which we wanted to explore. The available studies which dealt with the subject area of the cultural perception of normative figure and body weight very seldom simultaneously acknowledged overweight and underweight as factors that could constitute grounds for social rejection. Moreover, the available studies often concentrated their attention on examining the special cases of people suffering from illnesses which distort their attitudes towards the body, e. g. BDD or eating disorders (e. g. Garner and Garfinkel 1981; Brytek-Matera 2011). For this reason, on the basis of these results it is very difficult to judge whether notions used by such research participants would be shared by people who do not suffer from any body image distortions.

Another reason was the fact that the available studies defined "normativity" selectively by referring either to the cultural ideal of beauty (especially those using the notion of attractiveness (e. g. Grogan 1999)) or to the cultural ideal of health (especially those dealing with certain diseases). We decided not to separate those two spheres of normative regulation of the body. We hoped we could trace their interference in the attitudes/statements of our respondents.

By designing our study, we also wanted to learn something about the criteria which members of society use to judge whether one belongs to the socially constructed category of the "norm" vs. "fat" or "thin".

We were interested whether the personal characteristics of those interviewed, such as their age, gender or education, could determine in any way their attitudes towards the normativity of the body. For this reason, we used the criteria of age, gender and education when choosing the participants for our study.

Finally, we wanted to give our respondents the possibility to choose their own ideal of the normative body from the several presented options and let them justify their choices.

The main focus of the interviews was the identification of the common concepts and notions associated with the normative body weight. We were interested in what the interviewed people understood as "norm". We also wanted to know their opinions about those whose bodies do not fit into the standards of what is described as "norm": people whose bodies are either "too thin" or "too fat". We were interested in the categories and notions which the interviewed people used to refer to this issue as well as their justifications of which silhouettes fall within social standards and which do not. We aimed at obtaining a holistic view of the researched context: its logic, order, hidden and open rules (Miles, Huberman 1994), connected to this aspect of social reality.

METHODOLOGY

The study was based on 60 qualitative, individual in-depth interviews, conducted in Poland. All of the interviews were conducted according to a structured scenario, which was composed of several parts.

The first part of the interview was conducted with the use of a set of specially designed 3D images. The images represented 6 men's and 6 women's figures, which showed the silhouette of the same man/woman differentiated only by BMI¹. The silhouettes ranged from the BMI representing "severely underweight" to "obese". Among the graphics shown to the research participants only two figures fit the norm² (one from the "lower" and the second from the "upper" part of the norm), two were below the norm ("underweight" and "severely underweight"), two above the norm ("overweight" and "obese"). In this way we wanted to give our respondents the possibility to choose their own ideal of the normative body from the several presented options and let them justify their choices. The pictures were computer generated with the help of a weight simulator, which allowed us to illustrate the distribution of fat tissue at the same height but with a changing body mass³. With respect to each picture the participants had to judge if, in their opinion, the given figure fitted the "norm" or if the person was under or overweight. The concept of the "norm" was not in any way defined by us, the participants judged the pictures according to their own opinion. The pictures were presented in random order (but the same for all participants). By using this procedure we hoped those interviewed would decide for themselves where the "norm" was and justify their decision of ranging the silhouettes in a certain order. We asked the respondents to order the pictures twice: in the first case they referred to the normativity in the context of medical norms (health), in the second case in the context of aesthetical norms (beauty/attractiveness), in both cases justifying their choice of the most and the least normative or attractive figure. The same procedure was repeated for male and female figures.

In the second part of the interview we asked our respondents several additional questions concerning their perception of the social functioning of people whose bodies are either "too thin" or "too fat". We wanted to find out more about the views of our research participants' opinions regarding the factors leading to becoming overweight or underweight. We were also curious whether these factors differed with respect to women and men.

The interviews included all issues that participants in our research acknowledged as significant in respect to the perception of normative figures. We tried not to limit the interviews only to issues mentioned in our questions or connected with attractiveness (the aesthetic ideal) or health (the medical ideal). Our intention was to combine the problems of perception of the overweight and the underweight.

The choice of respondents was aimed at the greatest possible variety of the chosen cases. We were interested if such characteristics of our research participants as their age, gender or education determine their attitudes towards the normativity of the body in any way. Therefore, we decided to choose research participants according to the criteria of age, gender and educational background (with or without higher education). For each of the research participants we chose two others, representing the same age, gender and educational background.

¹ BMI reflects the physiological average of body weight in a population. We referred to it when designing the figures used in our research, as we wanted to obtain the set of figures in which the differences in body weight are visible and measurable at the same time.

² BMI between 18.5–24.9.

³ The research instrument was implemented by courtesy of Vitalia Company.

In this way we intended to be able to compare similar cases and make sure we could identify common patterns. We hoped that looking at a range of similar or contrasting cases would help us to understand a single case finding. When analyzing cases, we chose a variable-oriented strategy – we searched for themes that cut across cases (Miles, Huberman 1994: 175).

INTERPRETATION AND THEORETICAL DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS

The issues discussed by the research participants focused around three main areas of interpretation:

- The issue of discourse used by those interviewed to discuss the questions concerning the over- and underweight.
- The issue of individual responsibility for one's body shape and normative issues related to it: a shape of the body that is socially "punished" or "rewarded".
- Gender issues related to bodily normativity: different perception of the over- and underweight, locating explanations within the context of social roles ascribed to men and women.

In the course of the analysis of the research results our attention was drawn to the fact that, in their statements, the research participants very often used medicalized language and expressions from vocational discourse. The research participants used such expressions as: "glycemic index", "metabolism dysfunction", "BMI", "hormonal imbalance", "genetic predispositions", "health hygiene", "balanced diet", etc. In a similar way, also referring to "professional discourse" they labelled and categorized the presented pictures as "anorexic figure", "obesity", "overweight", etc. Such manners of constructing statements can signify reference to expert discourse and concepts as well as classifying categories constructed within this discourse, thanks to which individuals can be described, classified, identified and distinguished by means of several codes referring to professional knowledge and established norms (compare: Foucault 1978, 2003; Turner 2008). This knowledge and normalisation gains access to individuals, their bodies, gestures and everyday activities (compare: Foucault 1980: 151). As Bauman claims: "Together with the transition from the socially administered training and invigilation to self-control and auto-training we are witnessing a blur of the subject and the object, of the actor and his action, of the one who acts and the thing he acts upon"⁴ (1995: 95). This power-knowledge described by Foucault also shapes the way in which we discuss the topic of the body and its normativity. It creates bodies through discourse and causes them to exist within this discourse (compare: Shilling 2003: 66). This knowledge about the body has a disciplining, normative character; it defines corporeality, its criteria and analysis.

Moreover, control over corporeality, connected with the tool of power-knowledge described by Foucault (1978), instead of referring to the phenomenon of repression, pertains to arousing desire. Therefore, it is unsurprising that our research participants also selected figures which they evaluated as normative and the most attractive and that their evaluation of normativity and attractiveness referred to the established and socially accepted notions about the appropriate proportions.

In the context of the theory of power-knowledge and its normalising function, it is easier to understand why the research participants justified the normativity/non-normativity and attractiveness/unattractiveness of the presented figures using the categories of health and illness: "*definitely unhealthy, too round*"; "*this one looks ill*"; "*too skinny, looks as if has suffered from a serious disease*"; "*for me this is how a healthy man should look*".

⁴ All the citations from non-English publications have been translated by the authors of the article.

Sharing a widespread belief that "people with normal body mass (BMI), who are perceived as the most attractive, are also the most healthy and this means that esthetic preferences have a highly adaptive character" (Pawłowski 2009: 117), the research participants also seemed to refer to the already mentioned codes derived from knowledge about society and established norms.

The development of medical norms, which enables the comparison and classification of individuals, also allows us to supervise, control and "reward" or "punish" them (Foucault 2003). Categories such as overweight/underweight or the established BMI categories make it possible to compare individual people to the entire population, refer them to a determined scale and norm, at the same time "rewarding" them for satisfying the social norms of corporeality (normativity) or "punishing" if the norms are not fulfilled (overweight, underweight). This explains the stereotyping ("punishment") visible in the statements of the research participants in respect of both the overweight and the underweight.

Of note is that our research participants held more stereotypes against the overweight than the underweight people. The participants listed characteristic features attributed to the overweight faster and more willingly, while the features themselves were unambiguous and more specific than in the case of the underweight. Although both positive and negative characteristics were attributed to both groups, we can clearly see that the vast majority of negative characteristics were attributed to the overweight⁵.

If we assume that normativity is consistent with the ideal of a healthy but slim figure, which finds confirmation in the statements of our research participants, even significant underweight is more easily "passable" and is less visible than overweight. As Vigarello claims: "obligatory slimness pertains to manifest itself to 'fatness' with a greater strength, suggesting its more frequent occurrence, nearly 'obviousness'" (2012: 384). Therefore, the overweight seems to be more severely "punished" socially than the underweight and perceived as those who disregard self-discipline and are unable to change (Vigarello 2012: 355). Since "the body today is, no doubt about it, a private property, its cultivation, as the cultivation of allotment, relies on its owner" (Bauman 1995: 94).

The issue of self-control over one's body and its influence over one's figure is still another issue which drew our attention during the analysis of the research results. The research participants shared the belief that we have influence over our own bodies, that we are able to self-regulate and discipline them. They assumed that issues such as overweight, underweight or a normal weight depend mainly on our own conduct.

Such an attitude can lead, as a consequence, to perceiving the body as a project, treating it not as given but rather as assigned. According to Shilling:

"Subject to an unprecedented degree of rationalization, bodies are now seen and subject to intervention <...>. As such, they can appear to provide a firm foundation on which to construct a reliable meaningful sense of self in the modern world" (2003: 188).

Thus, if "human body – its size, weight, gestures and deportment – is shaped in accordance

⁵ Among positive features attributed to the overweight we can find such characteristics as: optimistic, happy and agreeable, having a healthy distance to themselves and the world, good-natured, open, sociable, composed, etc. Negative features attributed to the overweight include: unrestrained gorging, laziness, idleness, languidness, apathy, lack of self-control, frustration, inefficiency, etc. Positive features attributed to the underweight include: pursuit for perfection, ambition, vitality, expression and energy. Negative features concentrate around such characteristics as: nervousness and hyperexcitability, pessimism and viciousness.

with cultural criteria of appropriateness” (Turner 2008: 156), and “the physical ideals associated with body projects <...> are increasingly persuasive” – the following question appears: “who is able to control the ‘images of the desirable?’ <...> Norms <...> may help reproduce social inequalities by implicating people within the signifying practices of others.” (Shilling 2003: 192).

The research results also indicated a different attitude among the research participants to the evaluation of women’s figures and men’s figures. It seems that the statements of male participants and female participants copy social beliefs and stereotypes referring to sex and gender, gender roles, the images of gendered bodies and different expectations about how gender should be expressed (also on the corporeal level) by men and women.

First of all, it seemed to be more difficult for the research participants (especially men⁶) to evaluate the normativity and attractiveness of men’s than women’s figures, which could be concluded on the basis of their non-verbal reactions such as expressions of astonishment or confusion, longer time of reaction in comparison to evaluating women’s figures, less remarks on the subject, longer hesitation when giving answers as well as articulating statements such as: “*oh, damn, it’s difficult with men, but it’s within the norm... a bit skinny but normal – it’s so difficult with men, right? And this one – for me he’s still normal*”; “*as for a man, it’s normal, everybody is within the norm. For men the norm is broadly understood*”; “*for men the norm is different, because they don’t have to be as attractive as women, but they need to bring food while in the case of women it has greater influence on health*”.

The respondents were also more restrictive in the judgment of women’s than men’s figures. Although in both cases (female and male figures) our respondents tended to select the same three figures that they believed were normative: “lower norm”, “higher norm” and “underweight” – in their judgment of attractiveness more emphasis on slimness could be noticed in the case of female than male bodies. What is more, among our respondents, women turned out to be a bit more restrictive in evaluating figures (especially women’s) than men, who showed more tolerance especially in respect to men’s figures.

Sometimes male respondents, not only in respect to attractiveness, but also when talking about normativity of women’s figures, in a very direct way referred to their own individual taste and preferences⁷, what is very visible in such statement as: “*it works for me!*”; “*It’s just my intuition, I chose the most sexually attractive, harmonious body which is nice to touch*”; “*they can be carried; this one is too heavy to carry*”.

Remarks about one’s taste and preferences were practically none existent in women’s statements.

Also, men’s figures were treated by our respondents mostly in a “holistic” way, not “fragmented”, but described with reference to their general proportions, e. g.: “*the most attractive – an ideal of beauty that we know from sculptures and graphics. So we compare the proportions to Apollo*”; “*the appropriate proportions of weight and muscles*”; “*has the best figure, it can be characterized by proportional shapes, he works out, runs, and has a young-looking figure*”.

Women’s figures, on the other hand, apart from remarks about their general proportions, were very often “fragmented” and “dissembled”. As a result, in respect to women’s figures, there were comments depicting specific details of their bodies, which, according to the re-

⁶ The research participants were not asked about their sexual orientation. The evaluation of attractiveness of the figures of the same as well as different sex did not concern their sexual attractiveness. Nevertheless, a lot of statements of male respondents referred to the personal standards of women’s sexual attractiveness.

⁷ See Note 6.

search participants, determined not only their attractiveness but also their normativity, e. g.: *"belly sticking out"*; *"calves too fat"*; *"no, hips too fat"*; *"I like the stomach and hips <...>, but I don't like the upper part"*.

The indicated causes of overweight and underweight were also differentiated in respect to gender, presenting an image of women who "gauge problems", suffer from eating disorders and blindly follow the canon of beauty launched by the media and men who keep relative distance to the issues of physical self-attractiveness, spend a lot of time "feasting" and willingly reach for alcohol and other stimulants.

A greater restrictiveness in the evaluation of women's figures, manifested especially by female research participants, fits into the traditional model of disciplining and processing bodies as an expression of gender/sexual roles. In this process the female body is disciplined in a greater degree as sexually marked and "created" as an outcome of different endeavours which "grant" the body its femininity. As Bourdieu states, "the work of transformation of bodies, which is both sexually differentiated and sexually differentiating, <...> is performed partly through the effects of mimetic suggestion, partly through explicit injunctions and partly through the whole symbolic construction of the view of the biological body <...>. The masculinization of the male body and the feminization of the female body, [are] immense and in a sense interminable tasks <...>" (2001: 55). The body serves as a space for creating sexual differences, allowing for the expression of socially defined gender roles where "the task of maintaining the border between the masculine and feminine body, according to many authors, is mainly a woman's responsibility" (Jakubowska 2009: 46). It is explicitly emphasized by Kashak: "it is women who generally have to alter their bodies and restrict their movement to maintain the illusion of dichotomy. <...> The differences are not only observable but often exaggerated" (1992: 39). This particular pressure on "creating" and transforming the feminine body to differentiate it from the masculine body explains not only the greater restrictiveness in the evaluation of women's figures but also their greater "fragmentation", as indicated in the statements of the research participants, which concentrate mostly on the body areas associated with the expression of femininity. In majority, through the media discourse, "there is an impression created that each part of the body could be separated from the rest, improved and then the 'corrected' parts could be put together to form a new, nicer whole. Each fragment of the body: lips, neck, bust, belly, hips and legs, is treated as a source of problems: each can and should be changed, all need a constant monitoring and improvement" (Jakubowska 2009: 214).

A double cultural standard is also noticeable in another part of the conducted research: the fact that male participants, not only in the evaluation of attractiveness but also normativity of women's figures, in a very direct way referred to their own individual taste and preferences⁸. Since it is the feminine, and not the masculine, body that more often functions as the body-for-others, often submitted to judgments, normalization and compared with the established standards and individual preferences: "Everything in the genesis of the female habitus and in the social condition of its actualization combines to make the female experience of the body the limiting case of the universal experience of the body-for-others, constantly exposed to the objectification performed by the gaze and the discourse for others" (Bourdieu 2001: 63).

CONCLUSIONS

The issues discussed by the research participants focused around the medicalized discourse

⁸ See Note 6.

used by our respondents, individual responsibility for one's body shape and social "punishment" for not meeting the expected norms. Yet, it is the gender issues related to bodily normativity that appeared to be at the forefront of our interviews. The perspective described by Bourdieu, presenting a woman's body as "seen" explains both the above mentioned observation referring to the perception of the female body, as well as greater difficulty in the evaluation of normativity and attractiveness of masculine figures and the differences in attributing the causes of women's and men's overweight and underweight. It also indicates the cause of greater tendency to "fragmentize" feminine figures and greater restrictiveness in the evaluation of their normativity, manifested not only by men but – above all – by women themselves, since, as Bourdieu claims: "Masculine domination, which constitutes women as symbolic objects whose being (*esse*) is a being-perceived (*percipi*), has the effect of keeping them in a permanent state of bodily insecurity, or more precisely of symbolic dependence" (2001: 66).

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„Daugiau ar mažiau kūno“: socialinis kūno normatyvumo suvokimas Lenkijoje

Santrauka

Straipsnio objektas – socialinis kūno svorio *normatyvumo* suvokimas. Kaip ir kitose Vakarų kultūros paveiktose visuomenėse, taip ir Lenkijoje, piliečiai vis labiau susirūpinę dėl „tinkamo“ kūno svorio. Straipsnyje siekiama išsiaiškinti, ką reiškia „normalus“ kūno svoris. Tyrimas buvo grindžiamas empirine medžiaga, gauta atlikus 60 kokybinių interviu naudojant kompiuterinius vaizdus – įvairių tipų vyrų ir moterų siluetus: nuo „labai mažo svorio“ iki „nutukusių“. *Normatyvumas* šiame straipsnyje suprantamas plačiai, didžiausias dėmesys skiriamas socialinėms normoms, suvokimui, koks yra „teisingas“ kūnas. S. L. Gilmanas pasiūlė terminą *perėjimas*, siekdamas nurodyti momentą, kada asmuo įgauna visuomenei socialiai priimtina išvaizdą (Gilman, 2001). Straipsnyje siekiama išsiaiškinti motyvus, dėl ko vieni kūno siluetai priimami, o kiti atmetami; pristatomos bendros sąvokos ir sampratos, susijusios su „normaliu“ kūno svoriu; pateikiamos žmonių, kurių kūnai nepatenka į socialinius *normatyvus* kūno standartus (pvz., nutukę arba labai ploni), galimos ignoravimo priežastys.

Raktažodžiai: kūnas, *normatyvumas*, *perėjimas*, antsvoris, mažas svoris, nutukimas, plonumas