

## **The Bodies of Plastic Surgery: women's discourses on body, appearance and physical activity**

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Today, it is seen that some values, such as beauty and youth, have acquired great importance. The body moves to the front of the social scene and becomes the target of endless investments.

In order to reach the body patterns promoted by society, people have been submitting to several body technologies, many times on impulse. Guzzo (2005) warns that this desire of transforming the body is not new in society, but the ways to reach the ideal body have changed: "there are countless ways to engineer beauty" (p.140), but the majority of them are associated with great risks, which is the case with highly restrictive diets, excessive practice of physical activities, the use of anabolic steroids and aesthetic surgeries.

Plastic surgery is among the most accepted technologies of body modification today. According to the Brazilian Society of Plastic Surgery (2009), Brazil holds second place in the world ranking of surgeries, and most of the aesthetic surgeries are performed on women.

Sarwer and Cash (2008) highlight the importance of body image as a central element in the motivation of strategies for change in appearance. These authors stress the lack of studies which investigate the existence of body image disorders in people submitted to aesthetic procedures.

In Brazil, studies which investigate the relationships between body image and aesthetic surgery are rare, as well as the role of physical exercise before and after surgical intervention. Thus, this study aimed to investigate which relationships the women who were submitted to aesthetic surgeries have with their bodies and what the role of physical exercise is before and after surgery.

The study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of Research of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora, report No. 266/2009, on 11/10/2009.

The questions from the *Body Dismorphic Disorder Examination* - BDDE (Jorge et al., 2008) were used as a guide for a semi-structured interview. According to

Campana and Tavares (2009), this tool measures the “symptoms of an extremely negative body image” (p.164). Direct questions were added to the BDDE so as to characterize the sample, verify which plastic surgeries were performed and what the role of physical activities is before and after surgery.

All of the participants signed the Free and Clarified Consent Term and authorized the recording of the interview and its transcription.

In order to investigate the bodily variables, surgery and physical activity in the lives of the women who were in the sample, content analysis composed of a set of communication analysis techniques was used. Initially, the discourse markers were determined and, from them, two larger analysis groups: (1) references to the body and appearance, and (2) references to the practice of physical exercise.

The sample was composed of 10 (ten) women who were submitted to at least one aesthetic surgery. The women submitted to a reconstructive or bariatric surgery were excluded from the sample. The women ranged from 19 to 48 years of age.

Regarding the references made to the body and appearance, 60% of those interviewed claimed to have restrictions in terms of liking their bodies, reporting not only other imperfections in their appearance but also the imperfections which led to the first surgery.

*“[...] I think that because I have very little, so I, like,... sometimes am afraid to, like,... put on a blouse... because of my little breasts...”*

**(Participant 2)**

Nevertheless, 30% of those interviewed claimed they were completely satisfied with their own bodies after the plastic surgery. Some authors such as Tournieux, Aguiar, Almeida, Prado, Radwanski and Pitanguy, 2009, say that a positive change in appearance may lead to an increase in psychological well-being, including self-confidence and self-esteem

*“[...] There is nothing I don't like. [...] the part I was self-conscious about was the one where the surgery was performed, and so I really did have a complex, because my breasts were very small.”*

**(Participant 4)**

Most women in the study (70%) demonstrate a desire or availability to be submitted to another aesthetic surgical procedure so as to change their

appearance, even being aware of the possible risks and side effects of the surgeries. The motivations for those procedures vary from the preoccupation with another aspect of the appearance to social motivations, such as status.

*"[...] I'd do it, no problem. [...] Ah, let's see, thin the legs because I think they are a little fat and... the arm, right? Yeah... a little nip tuck is fancy, isn't it? (Participant 6)*

This trend towards acceptance of plastic surgery might be a reflex to the immense influence that the media and the means of communication have on people's behavior. Sperry, Thompson, Sarwer and Cash (2009) have concluded in their study that the act of watching programs about plastic surgeries was a predictor of attitudes regarding these procedures, where one can notice how the media and, consequently, the patterns seen in it, have direct influence on human behavior. In their study, Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, Bridges and Furnham (2009) highlight that the acceptance of plastic surgery and of the body is associated with people's sex, age and self-esteem.

The vast majority of the participants (90%) usually or used to get dressed trying to hide or disguise the imperfection in their appearance which disturbed them. Some of those women referred to the time before the surgery, claiming that it does not happen anymore.

*"I disguised a lot [...] I never put on a sleeveless top like the one I'm wearing today." (Participant 4)*

The analysis of the testimonies allowed us to verify the importance given to appearance in social situations, that is, on occasions when people are subject to other people's scrutiny. The study carried out by Park, Calogero, Harwin and DiRaddo (2009), with people of both sexes, showed that the opinion of the family, friends and partners has great influence on the interest in plastic surgery, and they agree that the valorization of an ideal of beauty may end up in social exclusion, discrimination and, consequently, damage to social coexistence.

*"[...] it seems that people look at you differently after you have the surgery, you know?" (Participant 9)*

Regarding physical activity, 40% of those interviewed claimed that they do not like to work out. All of those women recognized the importance of having an active life, be it for their health, for the maintenance of their bodily shape, or for

daily well-being, but they highlighted that they do not have the disposition to practice or are too embarrassed to go to a gym.

*"[...] I even think it's more important than the surgery, alright? I am fully aware of its importance, but I do not have the willpower."*

**(Participant 7)**

Those interviewed who said they practiced exercise regularly recognized several motivations for the maintenance of a routine of physical activities, namely, well-being, health, recovery and maintenance of the body after the surgery. However, none of them reported the practice of physical exercise as a way to change their bodies before the plastic surgery.

The fact that physical exercise was not recognized as a way to change the body is in accordance with the study performed by Gama and Gama (2009), who interviewed women who worked out and were submitted to some sort of aesthetic surgery. The authors observed that at no time did those whom they had interviewed report this practice as a way to trigger bodily changes, primarily arguing that changing the body through working out alone would take too long.

The increasing number of plastic surgeries reflects the reality of the search for a perfect body, which is seen in the gyms and in the consumption of products which are part of the commercialization of beauty (Silva, 2001). This panorama ends up causing a normal discontent with one's appearance, transforming into a pathological dissatisfaction, having the ability to bring about image and eating disorders.

It is important to highlight that in Brazil there are very few studies which investigate body image and the representations of the body related to aspects of aesthetic plastic surgery, whether they be pre or post-operation. In this light, this study aims to stimulate new research and other studies which analyze this problem.

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