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Book Review: Body Work: The Social Construction of Women's Body Image

S. M. Belcher

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Body Work: The Social Construction of Women's Body Image. Sylvia K. Blood. 2005. London: Routledge. 149 pp (+ ix and index). \$80.00 (Hardback). \$26.95 (Paperback).

Reviewed by S.M. Belcher¹

As stated in the book's subtitle, *Body Work: The Social Construction of Women's Body Image* addresses the widespread belief in Western societies that the size and shape of a woman's body should fit the ideal beauty myth because a woman's body is a her most important asset. As a clinical psychologist in private practice with a special interest in working with women who are "distressed" about eating and/or their body shape and/or size, Sylvia Blood provides an insider's critique of how mainstream psychology, psychiatry, and psychometrics theorize, "measure", and "treat" "eating disorders" and/or "body image dissatisfaction/distortion/disturbance/dysfunction" in the U.S.A. and other "Western" societies.

Blood's thesis is that in defining, measuring, and treating women's "eating disorders" and problems related to the shape and size of their bodies, clinical psychologists have identified the cause as residing in the minds of the women themselves – that they suffer from perception problems and/or individual psychological problems. This position is based on the following assumptions: that there is a "natural mind-body split" with the body being an external object to the mind; that women have problems of self-perception; that there is an individual-society dichotomy wherein social norms, ideologies, and social structures have little bearing on the "problems"; and the idea that individuals are unitary, rational (male)-irrational (female), and stable subjects with a single, coherent identity.

The book consists of seven chapters, each of which is a self-contained essay on one aspect of the problem, some of which have been published in academic journals. Thus, there is a lot of repetition of the basic analysis throughout the book. Blood's critique of mainstream ideas and practices regarding women's "eating disorders" and problems with the shape and size of their bodies addresses "professional" and "popular" literature and media as well as their influence on women in general. Ironically, while criticizing mainstream clinical psychologists for ignoring societal influences on women's values, ideas, and behaviour vis-à-vis their bodies, Blood also asserts that clinical psychologists blame women for not ignoring such social influences. Blood's critique is, thus, illogical. If society is irrelevant, why criticize women for being influenced by it? Perhaps Blood by trying to provide a meta-analysis of professional and popular literature and therapy, Blood neglects to address the various differences across the literature and clinical practices. This contradiction, however, is confusing and irritating for readers.

It is also unclear who the target audience is for this book. In some places, the level of analysis and discussion is too specialized and complex for the general public; yet due

¹ S. M. Belcher is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Trade in the College of Business at Feng Chia University in Taiwan. Belcher is a sociologist whose research is on the use of bodies in outdoor advertising and their influence on women and men in general. She has worked in sociology, women's studies, and now in international trade departments for the past 30 years. Currently her research is comparative, looking at differences and similarities in the use of bodies in outdoor advertisements in Egypt, Taiwan, and the English-speaking Western countries (USA, Canada, UK, Australia, NZ).

to frequent repetition, it is below the level appropriate for professional practitioners and associated academics.

Another major weakness of the book is that it assumes the reader has a sophisticated knowledge of patriarchy. Blood refers to feminist analyses, yet she never explains their basic premises, which would be necessary for the general public to understand them. Nor does Blood distinguish among the various feminist analyses of patriarchy, and her references to them are very selective. Nevertheless, Blood has reviewed an impressive array of literature and provided some critique, which may be useful for the general public and professionals alike.

Unfortunately, the only mention of men and their role in maintaining the problems associated with women's dissatisfaction with their body shape and/or size is a statement that men were conducting the eating disorder studies and doing the body measurements on women, which the female subjects found disturbing. Blood does not address the dynamics of male-female relationships in society and the influence of men on women in general. This is a major weakness, given that mainstream professionals and the general public lack any feminist analysis of society as patriarchal.

The chapters in the book would be more effective if published as separate essays in academic journals. This would be appropriate for professionals and academics interested in the topic. As a book, however, the chapters do not constitute a coherent whole. Furthermore, the book should have been edited to eliminate repetition and provide better transitions and connections between and among the chapters.

The author would also have to choose to address professionals and academics or the general public, but not both. There are many references to academic theories in sociology and feminist scholarship, of which most psychologists and psychiatrists would not be aware. Blood should have provided more detail regarding these theories so that her use of them would be better understood. This would also be desirable if graduate students are a target market. The book is too difficult for most undergraduates, although senior students in psychology and sociology may find it useful. As a book for undergraduate students and the general public, much of the academic theorizing and information about clinical studies would have to be summarized and presented in very simple terms and language. There is a need for a book like this, for the benefit of both professionals and academics, as well as for the general public. However, this book will be a source of frustration for both types of readers, *albeit* for different reasons.