

# Why do we need bras for babies?

- 10 February 2009 by [Susie Orbach](#)
- See the related blog on our [unhealthy obsession with our bodies](#)

UNTIL very recently, we took our bodies for granted. We hoped we would be blessed with good health and, especially if we are female, good looks. Those who saw their body as their temple, or became magnificent athletes or iconic beauties, were the exception: we didn't expect to be like them. Like gifted scientists, historians, writers, directors, explorers or cooks, their talents extended and enhanced the world we lived in, but we didn't expect this beauty, prowess or brain power of ourselves.

Over the past 25 years, however, the notion of the empowered consumer, along with the workings of the diet, pharmaceutical, food, cosmetic surgery and style industries, and the affordability and availability of their products have made us view our bodies as something we can and should perfect. Looking good for ourselves will make us feel good, we believe.

These days, inboxes are full of invitations to enlarge penises or breasts, to purchase the pleasure and potency booster Viagra, to try the latest herbal or pharmaceutical preparation to lose weight. The exhortations have fooled spam filters and popular science pages, which, too, sing of implants and pills to augment body or brain and new methods of reproduction which bypass old biology.

Mothers can buy bra sets for their babies or rubber stilettos, little girls can go on the Miss Bimbo website to create a virtual doll, keep it "waif" thin with diet pills and buy it breast implants and facelifts. They are primed to be teenagers who will dream of new thighs, noses or breasts. Simultaneously, governments warn of an epidemic of obesity. Your body, these phenomena shout, is your canvas to be fixed, remade and enhanced. Join in. Enjoy. Be part of it. Be wary of it. But, above all, fix it.

So why is bodily contentment so hard to find? Why are body transformations, from sex change, to the drive to amputate good limbs, to cosmetic surgery, if not ubiquitous, then a growing part of public consciousness? Why is sex a must-have, wrapped up with performance and saturated with fantasy in a way that would have Freud reeling? What is the deep appeal of extreme makeover TV shows? What is wrong with our bodies as they are?

I wrote *Bodies* to explore these issues, issues I encounter as a practising psychotherapist and psychoanalyst. In my consulting room, I see the impact of calls for bodily transformations, enhancements and "perfectibility". People do not necessarily turn up with particular body troubles, but whatever their other emotional predicaments and conflicts, concern for the body is nearly always folded into them, as if it were perfectly ordinary to be telling a life story in which body dissatisfaction is central.

The notion that biology need no longer be destiny, and the belief in both the perfectible body and the idea we should relish or at least accede to improving our own all contribute to the idea of a

progressively unstable sense of our body, a body which to an alarming degree is becoming a site of serious suffering.

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In an updating and democratising of the habit of the leisured classes of decorating themselves for amusement and as a marker of social standing, we are invited to take up this activity too. Something new is happening: our bodies are and have become a form of work. The body is turning from being the means of production to the production itself.

And where it was once women's bodies who were subjects of aggressive marketing, now men are targeted with steroids, sexual aids and specific masculine-oriented diet products. Children's bodies, too. Photographers now offer digitally enhanced baby and child photos - correcting smiles, putting in or removing toothy gaps, turning little girls into facsimiles of china dolls. Girlie-sexy culture now entrances more rather than fewer of us.

This democratic call for beauty wears an increasingly homogenised and homogenising form. While some people may be able to opt in, joyfully, a larger number cannot because the "democratic" idea has not extended to aesthetic variation but has, paradoxically, narrowed to a slim, westernised aesthetic, with pecs for men and big breasts for women. Body hatred is endemic in the west and is becoming one of its hidden exports.

What is very clear is that our old Cartesian or Freudian conceptions of the body, with their differing emphases on separation of mind and body, or on understanding the mind through the body and especially through sexual activity, now seem inadequate. In our time, the body has become as complicated a place as sexuality was for Freud. Like sexuality, the body is shaped and misshaped by our earliest encounters with parents and carers, who contain the imperatives of the culture they grew up in, with its injunctions about how the body should appear and be attended to. Their sense of their own bodily deficiencies and strengths, their hopes and fears about physicality will play themselves out on the child. In my consulting room, their impact on the child's body sense and the subsequent adult's body sense becomes clear.

The growing number of physical transformations that people seek suggest that we need to marry developmental theory - how we understand the passage from infancy to adulthood - with the impact of contemporary social practices. Emerging sciences over the last 30 years have extended our understanding of what conflicts in the mind can do to the body. They have underlined the fact that there is now a crisis about the body itself, that many of us are acquiring a "false", unstable sense of our body.

This has made me question the whole notion of the body as something that unfolds organically according to its own genetic imprint from birth on, acted upon by the mind - and nutrition - only at key developmental stages. We need new theories of how we acquire a sense of body that are just as compelling as our existing theories of the mind. It may even be possible that, rather like the acquisition of language, there is only a relatively brief period in which we can acquire a stable sense of our bodies.

When we have understood more about the psychology of our bodies, we will be able to propose a richer theory of human development, with the body and mind in their proper relationship. We may also better understand how the visual cortex is affected by our image-saturated culture, and how this has led to a shrinking of the rich variety of human body expressions. Like the languages we lose fortnightly, we are almost doing away with body variety.

These are my clinical concerns and my theoretical propositions. Morally, I am pained and disquieted by the homogeneous visual culture promoted by industries that depend on the breeding of body insecurity and which then create "beauty terror" in so many.

It is only because it is so ordinary to be distressed about our bodies or body parts that we dismiss as "vanity" what are actually serious body problems. In fact, they constitute a hidden public health emergency - showing up only obliquely in the statistics on self harm, obesity and anorexia as the most visible and obvious signs of a wide-ranging body dis-ease.

The good news is this is not the only possible outcome of a digital and hypersaturated image culture. The tools which have given rise to a narrowing aesthetic could be redeployed to include the wide variety of bodies people actually have. Nor is it necessarily in the long-term interests of the style industries to promote a limited aesthetic. Indeed, it may benefit these same industries to celebrate diversity and variety and to make it their ethical aim to transform the body distress so many experience today.

## **Profile**

Feminist psychotherapist Susie Orbach helped set up the Women's Therapy Centre in London. Among her clients was Diana, Princess of Wales, a bulimia sufferer. Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* was a bestseller. This essay is an edited extract from her new book, *Bodies* (Profile Books).