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Fragmented Histories, Fragmented Selves: Body Weight Preoccupation among Women in Post-Communist Romania

By Boróka Bó¹

Abstract

The emergence of body weight preoccupation in developing countries previously characterized by food insecurity has received limited sociological attention. This paper reflects on the lived experiences of minority women in post-communist Romania, as they navigate the rapid economic, political and social transformations taking place in the country. This is especially relevant, as Romania has experienced a rapid emergence of eating disorders shortly after the fall of communism. In examining the blurring of the boundaries between the individual and political bodies along with the loss of self that accompanies culture change, I argue that body weight preoccupation can serve as a counter movement to re-establish certainty through focus on the body. I find that in post-communist Romania, the self's experiences under the old regime are re-embraced and are used to adapt to a radically new society.

Key Words: body Weight Preoccupation, Women's Bodies, Anorexia, Social Change, Post-Communist Romania

Introduction

The objective of this paper is to examine a particular aspect of cultures undergoing rapid economic, political and social transformation: the emergence of body weight preoccupation in societies previously characterized by food insecurity and scarcity. While multiple authors offer different perspectives to account for the global phenomenon of the emergence of eating disorders in developing countries, most rely on western-centric sociocultural models of understanding when grappling with this issue. These models fall short in describing the amorphous environment characterized by change and the agency of the women navigating these worlds. In cultures that are undergoing rapid and often tumultuous changes – from agrarian modes of production to industrial followed by a post-modern information age in a short span of time – it is imperative to contextualize the issue of the body and the self in this unstable environment.

In thinking about why eating disorders have migrated to less developed countries, research often points to the evils of marketing and the cult of physical appearance sustained by corporate interests (Wolf, 1991). From here, others make the short leap to western cultural norms infiltrating the global east and south along with contradictions that arise when women try to embody changing gender norms (Prince, 1985; Katzman & Lee, 1997). Economic development becomes the scape-goat for self-doubt, powerlessness and “gender role confusion” that women

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experience (Gordon, 2000; Silverstein & Perlick, 1995). In addition, we find women portrayed as vulnerable and powerless.

The present paper seeks to contribute to the above theoretical landscape. While changing gender norms, economic climates and corporate drivers surely play a part in the emergence of eating disorders in developing countries, we need to venture a little deeper to uncover other social forces driving this phenomenon. As Nettleton (2005) points out, “social circumstances – in particular material and social deprivation – become inscribed upon people’s bodies” (p. 59). Health is to a significant degree socially determined; therefore we must locate the social body in history as shaped by the currents of globalization, and contextualize the issue of body weight preoccupation accordingly.

Before proceeding further, I must situate myself as a researcher in this work while also narrowing the focus on my work. After all, developing countries are not homogenous entities that easily lend themselves to theorizing at such a grand scales. Similarly to Mamo’s (1999) introspective ethnography, I also occupy a unique position within the phenomenon under exploration, in that I grew up under the isolationist regime of formerly communist Romania as a member of a minority group. Therefore, I occupy the position of the research participant who once spent a large chunk of time standing in lines for food rations, while also having had the privilege of traveling back to Romania after the fall of communism. To re-acquaint myself with the country I fled as a refugee, I decided to hitch hike through Romania after a 10 year absence, as this gave me the opportunity to immerse myself in the culture as a stranger of sorts. While talking to the people I met in the picturesque towns and villages of Romania, the subject of the past communist regime, the present economy and everyday hopes and dreams occupied our conversations. This is when I realized that my new female friends, who once were in my shoes in that they too lived through severe food shortages, were now concerned about restricting their food intakes and were taking up smoking in order to control their weight.

These conversations provide the personal and intellectual impetus for this paper. After all, it is mind-boggling how fast the women I talked to went from being near-starvation to worrying about their figures! At the same time, I am not sure that it would be appropriate to follow the existing research literature in labeling these women as anorexic. The label comes with negative connotations that do not fit the lived experiences and motivations of the people navigating life in rapidly changing countries like Romania. I touch on the literature pointing to the rapid rise of eating disorders in Romania, yet I will refrain from labeling the women I met, and will use the concept of ‘body weight preoccupation’ as the phenomenon under examination as it is less stigmatizing and is more accurate in describing their lived experiences. I will also contextualize the issue of the body and the self within the political, social, historical and economic environment of Romania. I further narrow my focus to specifically thinking about the experiences of minority women still living in the country who have lived through past food shortages.

Similarly to Mamo (1999) and Timmermans (1994), I rely on a form of introspective ethnography (Ellis, 1995; 1993) to inform my theoretical position. While traveling through the Transylvanian region of Romania, I kept a journal in which I recorded conversations along with my thoughts and feelings, faithfully keeping to daily journal entries during my visit. Incorporating personal experience allows for an analytic exploration that interweaves public and private. As Ellis (1993) points out, this “permits researchers and readers to acknowledge and give voice to their own emotional experiences, and to encourage ethnographic subjects (co-authors) to reclaim and write their own lives” (p. 771). Introspective ethnography calls for the

direct acknowledgment of the researcher being an integral part of the work, exposing their private thoughts and experiences and offering them up for interpretation as illusory researcher/respondent divisions are broken down (Mamo, 1999).

The paper is divided into three main parts. The first section of this paper situates the lived experiences of the women of Romania within the recent history of the country. Next, I will contextualize Romania's transition from communism to capitalism, with an eye on theories of globalization encompassing both neo-Marxist and neoliberal perspectives. The third section of the paper utilizes symbolic interactionist and feminist views, in order to incorporate the agency of the minority women of Romania. This section bridges both micro and meso level perspectives, building on the macro level perspectives of the first two sections of the paper. By juxtaposing these feminist and symbolic interactionist perspectives with the above Neo-Marxist and Globalization theories, I show that while both Neo-Marxist and Globalization theories must be taken into consideration when thinking about this phenomenon, they are inadequate by themselves in fully shedding light on this emerging phenomenon and on the standpoint of women as they adapt to their rapidly changing worlds.

I argue that rapid social changes in developing countries are accompanied by changes in self-concept that can cause a temporary loss of self, requiring enhanced boundary maintenance and a fundamental re-orientation of the self. When the existing social relations and building blocks of the old self fall apart, body weight preoccupation serves as a coping mechanism through which the self can re-balance, find, and center itself in the body. In other words, this phenomenon can be conceived as women re-appropriating old, long-internalized structures of oppression in order to navigate unstable and new political conditions. Numerous sociologists, including Charmaz (1983), Lorde (1984), Giddens (1991) and Nettleton (2005) allude to this, as they emphasize the interaction of the body and the self, directing attention to the two being inseparable when it comes to conceptualizing our lived experiences.

In this paper, I aim to delineate the ways in which rapid social change undermines the self as past experiences and meanings become no longer valid, along with how individuals use body weight preoccupation as a way to relocate their selves in a new unfamiliar physical space and time. My work illuminates the role body weight preoccupation plays in adapting to new cultures: in coping with rapid social change, certain old bodily experiences that may stem from oppression (such as the memory of being near-starvation) are re-embraced and altered in nature to serve in a perhaps paradoxical fashion as an aid of stability for the self under new circumstances.

The Romania Context

Since the fall of communism in December of 1989, Romania has undergone significant transformations touching every aspect of the culture, resulting in rapid demographic changes in fertility, mortality and both internal and external migration (Eke & Kuzio, 2000). These vast changes translated to the necessity to adopt new values and lifestyles while the population was still recuperating from living in an environment saturated by communist ideology and totalitarian control.

Of course, not everyone experienced the communist regime and the fall of communism the same way. Svendsen (1996) asserts that the gender identity fostered by communism was protective for the women of Romania, as their communist identities revolved around being productive, capable members of society. This is in contrast to western gender roles of

subservience, beauty and vulnerability women in developed countries are told to espouse. On the other hand, shortly after the fall of communism, 338,132 ethnic minorities submitted applications for asylum from Romania (CNS, 1995). The minority group members who did not espouse the communist ideology felt the need to flee the anomic and oppressive environment created for them by the dictatorial government who monitored the population's every move. Chances are, these same minority women also did not buy into the gender identity potentially fostered by the communist regime for the majority population. As Lorde (1984) points out, members of oppressed minority groups often "occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior" (p. 123). From the above, we can surmise that the gender identity fostered for the ethnic majority women in Romania likely did not correspond with the gender identity of Romania's minority women.

It is important to note that within this context, the government controlled everything from educational content, reproductive processes, the exact time during the day at which people could access electricity and water and how much sugar, oil and bread each family received to eat. In addition, both the study and practice of psychology was banned in 1977, leading to a complete lack of historical data on eating disorders (Joja, 2001). Nevertheless, more recent studies point to the rapid social and political changes experienced by the population driving the recent emergence of eating disorders. Joja (2001) asserts that after the fall of communism, Romanian women became preoccupied with slimness, whereas before 1989, this was not a concern. Other researchers also call for attention to the rapid the emergence of eating disorders in Romania within the last 10 years, but as the field of psychology is just being established, large-scale data is lacking (Serbanescu-Grigoroiu et al., 1998; Romila, 1997). One recent study looks at the prevalence of subclinical and clinical eating disorders in Romanian and minority Hungarian teenagers, arguing that eating disorders in Romania are presently as common as they are in the West (Kovacs, 2010). While this younger population is different from the women I spoke with as they do not carry personal memories of food shortages, Kovacs (2010) also states that the many social and political changes experienced by the population likely enabled the development of eating disorders in Romania.

Nettleton (2005) points out that "Social changes have bodily correlates... and how people use their bodies is contingent upon social context." (p. 52), drawing attention to bodies being closely regulated by the societies they live in, in explicit or implicit ways. Under the communist rule of Romania, this social context was defined to a large degree by a surveillance state, which necessarily translated to the need for self-surveillance and censorship for survival. In an environment of constant food shortages for the majority of the population of Romania, most women could not conceive of having to worry about eating too much. The physical movement of the population was also closely monitored, with the borders of the country under tight control.

From the above, we can deduct that during communism, one could form their sense of self through two avenues: by buying into the rhetoric of the all-encompassing regime, or through secret resistance against the communist government. While an argument could be made that non-conformist individuals may have a stronger, more independent self and perhaps the women who conformed to the communist ideology would have more difficulty under the new capitalist regime, for the sake of this paper, I will refrain from pursuing this thread as the focus is on Romania's minority women as those were the ones I interacted with on my journey through Transylvania. As Crenshaw (1991) points out, for minority women, "identity-based politics have been a source of strength, community and intellectual development" (p. 242). This self, forged in solidarity with others who were also marginalized, was the one that experienced the collapse of

the government and the state of political, social and economic instability that followed the transition between the political systems.

We can find many parallels between the experience of navigating a political regime collapse and the chronically ill experiencing a loss of self. As Kathy Charmaz so eloquently states: “The experiences and meanings upon which these persons had built former positive self-images are no longer available to them.” (Charmaz, 1983, p. 168). When one’s identity is constructed in opposition to a totalitarian regime (or in support of one), when that regime collapses, so does the foundation upon which the former identity is built. This is when the understanding of the impact of rapid global social change on the construction and re-construction of the self becomes necessary.

Porous Borders and Runaway Worlds

Romania’s transition from communism to capitalism has occurred within, and perhaps because of, larger global currents of change. Multiple discourses coexist and often compete in an effort to characterize globalization and its accompanying changes (Held & McGrew, 2000). Held & McGrew (2000) trace the intensification of discourses centered on globalization to the collapse of state socialist regimes, such as the one in Romania. Giddens (2003) points out that “different thinkers have taken almost completely opposite views on globalization in debates that have sprung up over the past few years” (p. 7). “Sceptics” focus on minimizing the significance of the effects of changes that accompany globalization, arguing that their significance has been overblown (Held & McGrew, 2000; Giddens, 2003). On the other hand, “globalists” or “radicals” hold that “globalization is a complex set of processes... that operate in (seemingly) contradictory or oppositional fashion” (Giddens, 2003, p. 13).

Of course, the perspective various thinkers take on globalization often depends on their geopolitical roots and alliances. Those aligned with the anti-globalization movement often point to the inequalities in economic, geopolitical and cultural power that the forces of globalization bring, holding these forces responsible for the pressing social ills of the globe (Giddens, 2003). Giddens (2003) takes this one step further, by arguing that the “risk situations” faced by our “runaway world” of transformations have “propelled us into a global order”, thereby shifting the very nature of nations (pgs. 3-18). Unlike Giddens and Held & McGrew, Wallerstein (2000) views the transformations of the last 50 years as a “misreading of the current reality,” arguing that the globalization discourse is “a deception imposed upon us by powerful groups and an even worse one that we have imposed upon ourselves” (p. 252). Wallerstein (2000) directly touches on the fall of communism in Romania, relating it to the fall of the Soviet Union, the world economy suffering a downturn, in addition to the collapse of multiple currencies (Wallerstein, 2000).

Wacquant (2010) introduces an important additional wrinkle into the discourse on globalization, as he focuses on the ideological aspects of this larger process. He asserts that neoliberalism is a transnational and global project, framing and driving the remaking of the state, with countries buying into a neoliberal market ideology that has now successfully infiltrated much of the globe. In some ways, his thoughts on the source of this ideology are similar to Wallerstein’s neo-Marxist orientation, as Wacquant also locates power to brain-wash the world in the hands of the “governing elites, having converted to the new ruling ideology of the all-mighty market radiating from the United States” (Wacquant, 2009, p. 56). Yet Wacquant (2012) diverges from Wallerstein’s “market-centered conceptions of neoliberalism in that (he)

prioritizes political means over economic ends” while parting with the “governmentality framework in prioritizing state crafting over technologies and non-state logics...focusing on how the state effectively redraws the boundaries and tenor of citizenship through its market-conforming policies” (Wacquant, 2012, p. 71).

The above global perspective is useful in contextualizing the fall of communism in Romania, the reformulation of the state itself, and the significant transformations touching every aspect of the culture thereafter. After all, as Altman (1994) points out, “globalization has an impact on all aspects of life, including the construction, regulation and imagination of sexuality and gender” (p. 63). Altman additionally highlights the ways in which poverty has become feminized in the neoliberal state, with millions of women carrying “the disproportionate burden of rapid economic change” (p. 64). Yet, he also underscores that dissimilar societies have different cultural and social value systems, and therefore it is difficult to transpose universal norms about food intake and body weight preoccupation uniformly among countries. Therefore, while it is important to consider the processes of globalization and their accompanying effects on countries such as Romania, the macro perspective necessary for this exploration is unable to fully account for the consequences of these processes on the direct transformations of the selves and identities of the women navigating these changing worlds.

This is where Gordon’s (2000) and Nasser’s (1997) assertions that eating disorders in developing countries can serve as barometers of cultural change comes in useful in bridging the above global perspective with a more micro view that speaks directly to the experiences of women. I extend their argument as I locate the social body and self in history while rejecting a dualism between mind and body. In examining the blurring of the boundaries between the individual and political bodies along with the loss of self that accompanies culture change; two concepts from the sociology of embodiment – “body projects” and the “lived body” – are helpful in expanding upon the emergence of body weight preoccupation in developing countries. These concepts are relevant to my argument, as they take into account what “the embodied actor” actually does, honing in on the agency of the women in question (Nettleton, 2005, p. 44).

Relying on Giddens, Nettleton proposes that “Within our post traditional societies, our identities and our sense of self are not givens... The body has come to form one of the main sites through which people develop their social identities... Whilst the environment and the social world seem to be out of control, the body becomes something of an anchor. Giddens points out that the self is embodied and so the regularized control of the body is a fundamental means whereby the biography of self-identity is maintained.” (Nettleton, 2005, p. 48). Nettleton and Giddens (1991) jointly point to an important source of the emergence of body weight preoccupation in developing countries: through the control and monitoring of their physical bodies, women are able to locate their selves in the body as they form new identities that correspond to the contours of their rapidly changing worlds. A woman in her 50s in the Transylvanian town of Sepsiszentgyörgy alluded to the above by reminiscing: “During communism, we did not have food, we did not have clothes. Now everything is different, everything is expensive, and no one knows if they will have a job tomorrow. I am worried about my daughter. She is not the only larger person in town, Mariska’s daughter is large too. But I have watch my weight. I don’t want to get fat. So I smoke, but I know it’s not good for me”.

While body weight preoccupation serves as a central route toward locating the self, it is also an indicator of the shift in power relations that accompany social and political changes. “In addition to controlling bodies in a time of crisis, societies regularly reproduce and socialize the kinds of bodies they need” (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987, p. 25). We see this shift in power

relations in how we experience our bodies, along with the emergence of the need to exert power over our individual physical selves by policing its boundaries. Employing Foucault's notion of 'governmentality' in the context of Romania, it is interesting to note that the construction of the individual self and the socialization of the preferred body under its totalitarian communist regime were based upon the regime discouraging and attempting to prevent too much individual preoccupation with the self (Foucault, 1991). The regime's all-encompassing rhetoric was based on sacrifice for the greater good, with everything, including food harvesting and distribution being communal. Yet, construction of the self in a capitalist market economy is the exact opposite: living in a hyper-reflexive world, "our self and identity becomes a 'reflexively organized endeavor'" (Nettleton, 2005, p. 48). With our biographical narratives in a constant state of revision, we are forever focused inward, anxiously searching for an ever-elusive self. This is when body weight preoccupation along with the once-familiar feeling of hunger emerges as an effective mechanism toward focusing attention firmly on something familiar and tangible in the physical body. This hunger, an integral part of the self under the scarcity that characterized communism for minority populations, emerges as the compass with which the unstable new self is able to situate herself in a radically new society.

Self in Body, Space and Time

When I speak of the self, I am using a definition delineated by Kathy Charmaz, grounded in symbolic interactionism, which asserts that "the self is fundamentally social in nature" and is "developed and maintained through social relations" (Charmaz, 1983, p. 170). This perspective allows for the conceptualization of the evolution of a person's self throughout their lifetime, an evolution animated by cultural change and transformation, shaping the formation of "new definitions of the self and relinquishment of old ones" (Charmaz, 1983, p. 171). Rapid social changes can also disrupt this evolution, as the self is situated and grounded in culture and social organization (Charmaz, 1983, p. 170). The continued validation of the self in daily life is crucial to the maintenance of the self and is central to my argument, as this aspect is affected most by social change. When societies undergo rapid transformations, the organization of the structures and the processes that sustain the self also change, leading to a (most likely) temporary loss of self. Suddenly, the old self image of a person – created, validated and sustained by a world and political regime now out of fashion – finds itself uprooted and incompatible with the new culture around them.

It is easy to see how women could experience social isolation and loss of self in a society like Romania that is undergoing rapid cultural transition. "Since selves ordinarily are situated in networks of social relationships, social isolation typically fosters loss of self." (Charmaz, 1983, p. 172). After the fall of communism, Europe felt and witnessed a mass exodus of the previously persecuted minorities from Romania. Mass migrations that can accompany social instability can lead to some degree of social isolation, as networks of past social relationships in which the self was situated in become disrupted. This translates to a loss of existing social networks, especially since much of this exodus happened before the advent of the internet.

A natural response to instability and uncertainty is to look for sources of stability. Part of dealing with transition is to search for ways to not only feel in control of something, but also to find something stable and familiar to hold on to. In both symbolic interactionist and feminist perspectives, the self is portrayed as agentic: "the human being who is engaging in self-interaction is not a mere responding organism but an acting organism—an organism that has to

mold a line of action” (Blumer, 1969, p. 3). An 84 year old woman in a village of approximately 200 people, while climbing a tall walnut tree with seemingly superhuman strength, linked her past and present experiences by stating: “I need to get all of them (the walnuts). They fed my family during communism, and I need them still. We would have starved without the walnuts. (All her family members have left her village.) I know I could fall and die, but I am a poor woman and selling these bought everything for us then and are still my gold.”

I argue that in rapidly changing societies, conscious action in search of stability can take the form of re-establishing certainty through focus on the body as most immediately involved in and affected by everyday life in Western societies; a society in which social norms and economic necessities focus on the appearance and treatment of the physical body. Hence the importance of body weight preoccupation, as this automatically focuses attention on and in the physical body. In addition, it also enables the person, who under communism was forced to restrict food and thus experience what became a permanent and very familiar feeling of hunger integral to the former (communist) self, to situate her unstable new self in new social and political settings. Thus, in an ironical and perhaps paradoxical fashion, the self’s experiences under the old regime are re-embraced and are used to adapt to the radically new society.

My argument relies upon emphasis that while it is generally agreed upon knowledge that selves are situated in physical bodies, it is necessary to acknowledge that “the two are meshed together” (Nettleton, 2005, p. 52). Therefore, it is important to resist erroneously dualistic notions of the body and the self. For the purpose of my argument, when I speak of the “body”, I am referring to the way the concept is described and outlined by Scheper-Hughes and Lock. According to them, the body consists of three bodies: the individual body, which is “understood in the phenomenological sense of the lived experience of the body-self”; the social body, which they conceptualize as “the representational uses of the body as a natural symbol, with which to think about nature, society and culture”; and the body politic, which refers to “the regulation, surveillance, and control of bodies (individual and collective) in reproduction and sexuality, in work and leisure, in sickness and other forms of deviance and human difference” (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987, p. 8). By looking at the self and body through this lens, we see the union between the two while also paying homage to individual agency, societal influences and political forces shaping our weight-conscious actors as they are engaged in a grand play of cultural metamorphosis.

In addition to body weight preoccupation serving as a mechanism to re-establish certainty of the self through the physical feeling of hunger at the center of the individual body, it is also a way to navigate the relationship between the individual and social bodies. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock (1987) speak of the relationship between individual and social bodies being grounded in power and control. “When the community experiences itself as threatened, it will respond by expanding the number of social controls regulating the group’s boundaries... The three bodies – individual, social and body politic – may be closed off, protected by a nervous vigilance about its exits and entrances” (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987, p. 24).

When thinking about the women who directly experienced the transition between Eastern dictatorial regimes and Western ‘free societies’ it is striking that they seem to replicate in their own person what in the above theory is claimed to be behavior of the body politic or the political self. We see this closing off of the individual body in body weight preoccupation, as food intakes are closely monitored, effectively exhibiting a “nervous vigilance” about bodily entrances. In the case of body weight preoccupation, it is not necessarily that the self is threatened in a life-or-

death sense, but that it feels threatened as its old cultural foundations are no longer stable. This does not make the sense of loss of self any less real, as the effects are felt as real.

Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) further state: “When the sense of social order is threatened, as in the examples provided above, the symbols of self-control become intensified along with those of social control... Individuals may express high anxiety over what goes in and what comes out of the two bodies.” (p. 24). This anxiety is an integral part of the body weight preoccupation of Romania’s minority women as they situate themselves in their unstable new selves and new social and political settings. During my visit, I spent nearly a week in a largely Roma village as the guest of a family with three teenaged children. Their father worked abroad, while their mother (in her mid to early 40s) often talked about her efforts to restrict her body weight. Our dinners largely consisted of mushrooms picked from the forest next door with fried potatoes and a variation of a local sugary soft drink brand. Yet, nearly every night, she talked about her anxiety about gaining weight like the other older women in the village, her decision to skip lunch and to restrict her overall food intake. “Anyway, it’s good”, she would say, “leaves more to eat for my kids, they are still growing. And even though I gained some weight from when I was young, I hope I won’t get as big as some of the others”.

The above exploration on how self-identity is influenced by social and political changes leads to the necessity for incorporating a feminist perspective when considering the agency of the marginalized minority women within this landscape. Various theorists speak directly to this. Mackinnon (1982) calls for the recognition of the validity of the personal experiences and the voices of women. She is in direct conversation with Marxist and neo-Marxist theorists, pointing out that one of the major limitations of Marxist thought is the lack of direct acknowledgement that capitalism relies on women’s labor in the reproductive sphere. When thinking about the agency of women who are navigating political transitions, Mackinnon calls attention to autonomy and authority being partial and gradual, highlighting that “women’s powerlessness has been found through consciousness raising to be both internalized and externally imposed” (p. 520).

Similarly to Mackinnon, Smith (1989) also calls for recognizing the “standpoint” that stems from the social position of women while honoring the acute power of perception that is necessarily honed by the marginalized for their survival. Her perspective is particularly useful when it comes to thinking about body weight preoccupation, as she insists that we must embark on “an organization of inquiry that begins with where women *actually* are and addresses the problem of how our everyday worlds are put together in relations that are not wholly discoverable within the everyday world” (p. 48). In many ways, her call sums up the quest of this paper wonderfully, as this is exactly what honoring the lived experiences of body weight preoccupation of Romania’s minority women relies on, as I consciously refrain from projecting Western-centric, authoritative and patriarchal diagnostic labels on their experiences. This conscious grounding of the problem-at-hand in a feminist theoretical perspective allows for the consideration of the phenomena in question within “the working contexts of the social processes constituting the phenomena thus named” (Smith, 1989, p. 62).

Both Fiske (1986) and Lorde (1984) assert that individuals have the agency and power to re-appropriate and transform discourses of oppression or domination. Lorde (1984) calls on women to “identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference” (p. 123) Further, she asserts: “For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures” (p. 123). In other

words, she can be interpreted as reaffirming the agency of women to re-appropriate old, long-internalized structures of oppression in order to find stability to navigate unstable and new political conditions.

Connell (1987) emphasizes that while sexuality and gender are socially constructed, they are also “historically mutable” and “practice-based” (p. 63). She asserts: “... The practical transformation of the body in the social structure of gender is not only accomplished at the level of symbolism. It has physical effects on the body; the incorporation is a material one. The forms and consequences of this incorporation change in time, and change as a result of social purposes and social struggle... In the reality of practice the body is never outside history, and history is never free of bodily presence and effects on the body” (p. 87). By viewing the experiences of the minority women of Romania through this framework, we find their history permeating their present, with social structures of the past and future playing a part in the construction of their selves and bodies. Bodies are sculpted in time and memory, chiseled by the constraints in place within one’s social world, with individual agency to seek stability still remaining on the forefront.

Like Mackinnon (1982), Connell also views the state as “the institutionalization of gender” (p. 126). Instead of focusing on the extraction of surplus labor as Mackinnon does, Connell directly engages the ‘ideological apparatuses of the state’ (Althusser, 1970), asserting that states function as historically patriarchal and repressive structures, attempting to control sex and gender on multiple levels, from criminalizing some activities to controlling the gender composition of the labor force, being “deeply implicated in the social relations of gender” (p. 126). The division of labor between women and men takes place within this state apparatus, and is represented by the “organization of housework and childcare, the division between unpaid and paid work, the segregation of the labor markets... discrimination in training and promotion, unequal wages and unequal exchange” (p. 96). In her framework, gendered labor divisions are an integral feature of capitalism itself. For Connell, structures allow one to “operate by proxy to produce results one’s own capacities would not allow” (p. 92). Structure is present in individual practice, in addition to structures being actively constituted and reproduced by individual practice (p. 94). With this in mind, the individual practice of body weight preoccupation can be viewed as reflecting the larger structures that constrain the behavior of the women. Therefore, body weight preoccupation can serve as both a stabilizing force for the individual self, in addition to also stabilizing the larger structure.

Connell asserts that power is multifaceted, and is comprised of individual acts (and the agency from which they stem from) in addition to the structures of power that rest on existing social relations: “relations of power function as social structure, as a pattern of constraint on social practice” (p. 107). She points out that within the structures of social arrangements, we enact practice, so structures are not completely constraining. Here, we find Connell’s thoughts on individual agency and the structural constraints on it. Both the powerless and the powerful are constrained: “Men are empowered by gender relations, but in specific ways which produce their own limits” (p. 108). Yet, while structures constrain individual agency and practice, reconfiguring patterns of practice also affects and ultimately has the potential to reconfigure structure, hinting at the possibility of social change. We can connect her thoughts on agency and patterns of practice to the ways in which women re-appropriate and reclaim long-internalized structures of oppression and patterns of practice in order to be able to adapt to and navigate unstable and new political conditions.

It is interesting to note that like symbolic interactionists, theorists of gender also rely heavily on honoring and interweaving the individual experiences and voices of women into their frameworks. One can't help but wonder if this stems partly from an effort to give voice to the historically invisible 50% of the population: women. In cultures undergoing rapid economic, political and social transformation, the perspectives of symbolic interactionism and feminism provide an additional tool for understanding for the emergence of body weight preoccupation. The perspectives above, and my own more specific thesis based upon it, is markedly different from previous economic or western-centric sociocultural models, as it focuses on the lived experience and agency of the women experiencing cultural migration around their selves. By doing so, it gives the women agency and frames the emergence of body weight preoccupation in a non-judgmental manner.

Conclusion

Romania provides an important and interesting context to investigate the very recent emergence of body weight preoccupation within the borders of the country, as it is distinguished from the more developed areas of Europe by the recent history of severe food shortages experienced by its population, along with the rapid social changes it has undergone since the fall of communism. In addition to undergoing dramatic shifts in its political and economic development and orientation, these changes were accompanied by high rates of intra-regional and internal migration of the population, disrupting existing social networks. The relevance of these conditions for the well-being of the population is underscored by the lack of strong institutional support systems that could buffer Romanians from the most-likely negative effects of these social and economic instabilities.

In this paper, we have seen how body weight preoccupation and the feeling of hunger that often accompanies it can serve as a mechanism toward locating the self in an environment characterized by rapid social change. Nettleton (2005) asserts that “the salience of the loss of self is linked to features in contemporary societies”, with an emphasis on bodily controls and the “boundedness” of the body (p. 56). My work takes the existing sociological and psychological work on the subject a step further, as by situating the phenomenon in a specific global and geographic context and focusing on the lived experiences of the women under study, I give credence to the agentic nature of the actors navigating rapidly changing cultures while also framing the issue of body weight preoccupation in a non-judgmental manner.

I illustrate that this conscious action can take the form of a counter-movement to re-establish certainty through focus on the body. Hence the importance of body weight preoccupation, as this automatically focuses attention on and in the physical body. We find that in post-communist Romania, the self's experiences under the old regime are re-embraced and are used to adapt to a radically new society as women re-appropriate experiences of domination and oppression to navigate their rapidly changing worlds.

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