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## Bigorexia as a male identity disorder

### Masculine identity. A theoretical perspective

The historical, social, cultural and economic changes that are taking place in the modern world require the individual and society to establish their own identities, to deliberate on who we are and who we would want to be. David Riesman, among others, states that the aforementioned factors reveal different perspectives that determine our image of our own "self" (Riesman 1950). In the literature, we can find various definitions of identity. Regardless of their theoretical context, however, what they all have in common is uniqueness and distinctiveness. One can talk about at least three main planes of identity: substantial, individual and social.

The substantial dimension of identity relates to our spirituality and is the essence of humanity. Our identity is immanently linked with our spirituality and is a gift that we were given by our creator. Therefore, our drive towards perfection is the meaning of our lives, but this is the maturity we gain only at the point of death. In Hinduism, human soul is synonymous with one's consciousness. On one hand, it is something separate from the body, but on the other, it is highly dependent on it. Christians, in turn, see the body as a prison of the soul, which limits the perfect spiritual sphere that is freed at the point of death, when the body and soul are separated. The substantial dimension of our identity relates to the value of the body as something secondary and it is only up to us to decide whether we will make use of its temporal joys (focus on developing our body) while losing our opportunities to develop and perfect our souls, assuming that the body is imperfect and does not disturb the development of the immaterial part of our "self" (Paleczny 2008).

The mental dimension of identity, represented, among others, by Erik H. Erikson, focuses on our individual consciousness, and relates our identity to our minds. It presupposes that identity is based on knowledge, and is a resultant of the biopsychosocial attributes of a person that are culturally conditioned in the spiritual and material planes. It relates identity not just to internal experiences, but to the influence of outside stimuli on the development of the human mind, body and spirit. The psychological dimension has an individual character because the experiences we receive through our senses are highly subjective depending on the level of development of a given individual, their gender, age and their immersion in the culture in the process of socialisation and upbringing (Erikson 1980).

The sociocultural dimension relates to the sociocultural factors that comprise its determinants which designate our place in the social space. Representatives of this approach include Zygmunt Bauman and Margaret Mead. It is culture that has always determined our identity, and the emerging social norms that have pointed towards the direction of our development (socialisation). According to Tadeusz Paleczny: "Cultural identity is a type of individual consciousness that is group-ordered based on the common elements of childhood, tradition, symbols, values and group norms, which marks the individual as similar to or different from others who are situated in the near or far social space." (Paleczny 2008, p. 22). The definition proposed by Paleczny is of both an individual and a group character (cf. Kloskowska 1996; Berger, Luckmann 1966; Melchior 1990; Boksański 1989; Mead 1975). The principal elements of individual identity according to Maria Jarymowicz and Teresa Szustrowa are the awareness of "one's own coherence in time and space throughout various periods of life, in social situations and fulfilled roles, as well as the awareness of one's distinctiveness, individuality, and uniqueness" (Jarymowicz, Szustrowa 1980, p. 442). In the postmodern period of the cult of the body for all social groups, and especially for select individuals, there is a specific relationship between the tendency to and drive towards individuality on the one hand, and the desire to become a cohesive element of the group on the other. An imbalanced masculine identity, unlike the female identity, not just in the sphere of the value of the body (appearance) but also in the face of socio-cultural requirements, requires women to maintain a slender body figure, and requires men to be athletic. These drives sometimes take pathological forms: anorexia in the case of women, and in its male counterpart – bigorexia.

The aforementioned dimensions of identity do not function in isolation, but, as previously mentioned, are based on multiple factors, the most important of which are psychological (individualistic), cultural and social. Based on these determinants, mixed, more complex identities, which are a sum of our experiences, emerge in the postmodern society. Pessimists declare that the age of globalisation has led to a crisis of identity. They claim that there is no homogenisation of culture, but rather its gradual or abrupt destruction or opposition to it in some of its areas. One example can be the 9/11 attacks and the recent terrorist attacks in Paris. We see the struggle of three worlds: the Muslim, the Catholic and the secular. Philosopher Leszek Kołakowski states that "The assertion of self-identity, whether by an individual, by an ethnic group, or by a religious body, always involves a danger: a desire to dominate others. In defending his legitimacy, an individual may easily come to feel that he must affirm it by expanding his power" (Kołakowski 2013, p. 251).

## The body and health and value

Health and the body in both the physiological and mental sense have always had an important place in the hierarchy of the needs of a person, which is reflected in various practices of maintaining it in various cultures. These include activities connected with healing, hygiene, and physical development, through to magical

effects also influencing the psyche. In practice, such behaviours were often connected. Religious prescriptions (the Bible, the Quran) were concerned with hygiene, nutrition and even etiquette. An overview of such practices from antiquity to modernity in various cultures is presented by Irena Rudowska (1989).

Relatively much is known about the civilisations of ancient Greece and Rome, both in terms of the attitude towards health and the beauty of the human body and the culture surrounding it.

Ancient Greece had a high level of hygiene. The goddess Hygieia, a daughter of Asclepius, was a personification of this concept. There were baths connected with the gymnasium (a school for the body and soul). J. Rudowska writes that the amenities were not as luxurious as in Rome, but bathtubs and aqueducts were already known. Lidia Winniczuk writes that "boys on Crete at the age of 14 started rigorous physical training, which was to prepare them for military service" (Winniczuk 1983, p. 273). When they came of age at 18, they joined teams known as "hetaireia". Greek medicine too was highly developed, which was appreciated by the Romans who hired Greek doctors, such as Galen, a member of the imperial court of Marcus Aurelius. Household healing practices were passed on from mothers to daughters.

In the classical period in Athens there was no legal requirement for children to be taught, but by custom this was the duty of their parents. Plato even thought that children have no duties towards parents that did not give them education. Plato's dialogue *Laches* is a "pedagogic" dispute of worrisome parents and other speakers, which of course include Socrates. They all look for advice on where to send their sons and what to teach and train them in, in order to best benefit them (Plato 2012). The Greeks loved the beauty of the human body and dedicated much attention to preserving its vitality and physical fitness. A means to this was sport, which was practiced in numerous sports facilities, and the Olympics as fitness competitions in various disciplines.

The Greeks, like other people, wanted to be happy. Philosophers discussed happiness at length. Various schools of philosophy argued about what is necessary to achieve happiness. Aristotle thought that even the highest "moral and mental goodness, was not enough. For a man to be happy, he also cannot be very ugly or of bad parentage, weak or ill, poor, lonely, devoid of family and friends. Only various kinds of goodness combined in a man make him happy. Aristotle was convinced that if one needs all of them to achieve happiness, one should train all human abilities" (Tatarkiewicz 1962, pp. 62–63).

The Greek philosophers agreed on many other issues, especially that happiness depends on the individual, not on external conditions. All the schools of philosophical thought were in agreement that only moral and wise behaviour leads to happiness. Władysław Tatarkiewicz believes that even the hedonists were in agreement with the moralists on this, and quotes Epicurus: "It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and honourably and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and honourably and justly without living pleasantly" (Tatarkiewicz 1962, pp. 62–63).

Ancient Rome introduced fewer new philosophical ideas, but the Romans, as empire builders, had to care for the physical shape of their legionnaires. In the

capital itself, sport was connected with hygiene. Much care was given to aqueducts and plumbing. Already in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, Tarquin the Proud built the first sanitation system (*cloaca maxima*). In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, the first public bath-houses were being built and according to an inventory from the times of Agrippa, there were 170 at the time (according to Pliny the Elder, the number was as high as 1000). The numbers sound improbable, but it's possible that they include smaller baths, and not just in the capital itself. Agrippa was also the builder of the first *thermae*, which were more than just baths. They were complexes that include various pools, gardens, sport stadiums, gymnasiums, massage and cosmetic parlours, but also libraries or even museums.

In Poland, the frequent wars and physical labour required much strength of spirit and fortitude. Zbigniew Kuchowicz writes: "It appears that tall, broad-shouldered men were valued [...] Much value was also given to male elegance, although this, of course, depended on the social circles". This also included the rural areas. "A handsome farmhand was a young man who cared for his appearance, and in some areas wore a feathered hat" (Kuchowicz 1957, pp. 268–269).

### Bigorexia as the loss of one's identity

The expansion of one's body leads to the diminishing of one's own identity and to subordinating the "self" to the body. Andrzej Pawłucki states that postmodern manifestations of self-creation through the body are characterised by making such creators the slaves of their artificially enhanced bodies. A body created through effort and pain, attaining fitness through arduous training in the gym, "pushes" the "self" into the background, and makes it subservient to the body. According to the cited author, "elevating oneself through the body is accompanied by diminishing one's spirituality, including getting rid of it entirely" (Pawłucki 2001, p. 70). Submitting to postmodern ideologies of the cult of the body, however, leads to losing one's humanity and identity, to the empowerment of just one's body. This phenomenon is known as bigorexia. According to Harrison Pope, who coined the term: "bigorexia is a type of dysmorphophobia, a disorder distorting the perception of one's body. It is characterised by an obsession about one's appearance and musculature. An afflicted person sees themselves as not muscular enough, and strives towards achieving an unreal ideal, by using substances that aid muscle growth" (Maciejewska, Trzciński 2004, p. 3). It also has a psychological dimension and is first and foremost related to the distortion of one's own body image.

Zbyszko Melosik also shows a distorted ideal of a male body. He writes that in the culture of consumption, human identity is reduced to the body, and its construction shifts from the inside to the surface. Previously, the body was just the vessel of one's self and now it dominates, "one feels that this is all that is left" (Melosik 2006, p. 24). Additionally, the current media landscape orders us to be the masters of our bodies, and to compare them to the models who appear in commercials. Melosik calls this phenomenon the "mediaisation of masculinity". He then states, citing other scholars, that "among many middle class men, one can observe

an obsession with their bodies, which leads to taking actions to make their body more sexually attractive, which used to be seen as exclusively feminine" (Melosik 2006, p. 24). Citing research done in the United States, he also claims that men increasingly look desperately for ways to "embody" their own bodies. They retreat into their bodies, which become their prisons.

Examples confirming the above statements include research done under my supervision, which confirms that in the case of bigorexia the subjects' own self-image is distorted. A group of people using a gym in the Tri-City area was studied. Among them, 100% were men, 52% with a higher education, 24% with a secondary education, 14% with a vocational education and 10% still students. Among the studied men, 65% were unmarried and 35% were married. The prevalence of bachelors might attest to the need to be physically attractive, as appearance, according to the study subjects and to the public opinion and media, is decisive not just in personal life. It is hard to unambiguously determine the cause of this phenomenon – maybe an actual need within the men or their low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, or just a new fashion. Most of the gym users were men between 180 and 190 cm of height and 80 to 100 kg of body mass. Their body weight was not a result of obesity, but of muscle growth. One should note that they were men who had already been using the gym for several months, who might have already lost weight, or, in the case of people of low weight, had gained musculature.

The body parts that the men cared for the most were, in order: their chest, stomach, legs, back, forearms, buttocks, shoulders and calves. 23% of them visited the gym every day, 51% several times a week, and 26% several times a month.

The study shows that the exercise brought the intended effect and satisfaction from fulfilling it. The studied men were happy with their appearance and regularly exercised in fitness clubs. In this way they wanted to continue developing their bodies. At the same time, they were afraid that if they stopped exercising, they would lose all the effects they had worked on. This begets the question what means were used to achieve these effects. The studied men said that the specialist press used by those who worked out at the gym were magazines such as "Muscle" or "Kulturysta", which are not highly regarded by professionals. They often include advice on quickly "gaining mass with low cost", including "enhancers" such as steroids, gainers, supplements etc. Among the men who worked out at the gym, 29% admitted to having used steroids, 80% had used gainers, and 32% other dietary supplements. The quantitative data confirms that attaining the desired look was more important than adopting a critical attitude towards the side effects of using pharmacological enhancers.

The model of the modern man changes and is influenced by various socio-cultural aspects. This is pointed out especially by Melosik, who writes that "the modern man found himself in a certain socialisation trap" (Melosik 2006, p. 188). He faces the following questions: should he develop the traditionally masculine traits and dominate women by objectifying them, or focus on developing feminine traits, feeling his unmanliness, an "identity inadequacy" (Melosik 2006, p. 189; Nowakowska 1988). Such a split can lead to a crisis of masculine identity. Not all men can attain the promoted ideals or even approach them, which can lead to

stress, the awareness of being an incomplete and imperfect man. This opinion already enters the area of deviations that might be found in the group of men who are working out at the gym, who are unhappy with their bodies or setting impossible goals for themselves. But the answers do not include such goals.

Not all of those who use the gym maintain an Aristotelian moderation, and instead spend even more than a dozen hours daily at the gym. An intense training puts a major strain on the heart and limbs and leads to the weakening of the body's defence mechanisms. Breaks in such an intense workout lead to relatively quick weight gain.

When they lack the strength to work out, they use vitamin supplements, miracle diets and even anabolic steroids, which disrupt the cellular metabolism, disrupting the absorption, creation and ingestion of substances necessary for the body to function effectively. Such a physical anomaly (pathology) spreads throughout body's systems through a domino effect. The consequences include a lower immunity to diseases and can lead to diabetes and even cancer.

This state of addiction can be called bigorexia (masculine anorexia) – losing one's "self" and serving as a medium to something unintentional, something beyond oneself. Andrzej C. Leszczyński, when trying to find 21 year old Arthur Rimbaud's reasons for abandoning poetry and any literary life whatsoever, quotes Chesterton: "A man whose mind knows the way to madness is a poet. A man whose mind cannot find the way back is a madman". Rimbaud, by choosing between life and writing, chose the former: as here he existed as the "self" and regained the feeling of normalcy (Leszczyński 1998).

Let us hope that under the watchful eye of good coaches and in a favourable social atmosphere, the gym can be like a Greek gymnasium, where the Roman phrase by Juvenal is realised: "*mens sana in corpore sano*".

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## Summary

### *Bigorexia as a male identity disorder*

This article explores the role that the gym plays in the formation and negotiation of masculinity for men. It arose out of an interest in how sport can serve as a masculinising practice – a practice that helps shape, reinforce and validate the constructions of certain versions of masculinity – and what the side effects of this practice are.

## Keywords

masculinity, physical strength, body, bodybuilding, identity

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