The Body Image Constitution

Henrique Guilherme Scatolin
PUC-SP (Pontificate Catholic University of São Paulo), São Paulo, Brazil

This article discusses the body image formation according to the neurologist Paul Schilder conceptions. It aims to conduct a bibliographic survey in his work *The Body Image: The Psyche Constructive Energies*. Throughout this survey, a literature review of the body image concept is done, investigating its libidinal structure and focusing on psychoanalytic contributions to its formation. As a result of this survey, the erogenous zones importance and its respective extensions throughout the body is highlighted. It is concluded that, for a body image study, this theme researcher should bring into prominence its psychological, physiological and sociological aspects; i.e., its three-dimensionality.

Keywords: body image formation, erogenous zones, three-dimensionality

Introduction

This article seeks to focus on the neurologist Paul Schilder vision on the body image formation, based on a literature review of his work entitled *The Body Image: The Psyche Constructive Energies*. For starting this discussion, how does Schilder understand body image?

According to Schilder (1935, p. 11) “Body image is understood as the figuration of our body formed in our minds; i.e., the way the body is presented to us”.

The body schema (also understood as body image) is the three-dimensional image that all people have of themselves. In this three-dimensional aspect we have the psychological, sociological and physiological aspects.

For Schilder (1935, p. 15), “When studding the body image, we should address the central psychological problem of the relation between the impressions of our senses, our movements, and the general motility”. This means that the body schema is in perpetual self-construction, living in continuous differentiation and integration. On the other hand, our body postural model relates to the postural model of other bodies. Our body image experience and other bodies experience are closely interconnected. Therefore, the emotions, actions and perceptions are inseparable from our body image. They contribute to our body image construction.

Material and Method

The method to be used in this article is supported in a bibliographical survey on the work entitled *The Body Image: The Psyche Constructive Energies*, published in 1935, which seeks to give prominence to the sociological and psychological aspects of body image constitution, emphasizing the erogenous zones, the libidinal phases and the social aspects throughout its constitution.
Results

First, to Schilder (1935), the body image begins to form from birth. Namely, since birth, two factors have special participation in the body image creation: one is the pain and the other is the members’ motor control. The pain helps us decide what we want to get closer to the ego and what we want to maintain the furthest possible from it. In addition, the visual experience has a leading role in the body image formation. This experience is also lived through the action. In other words, it is through the actions and determinations that we give the final shape to our body ego. Thus, the visual impressions influence the body schema, since body image can be disturbed by experimental changes in vision, but it is restructured, forming a new unit.

For Schilder (1935, p. 60), “The body schema development also occurs parallel to the motor sensory development”. Throughout the psychic development, the movement leads to a better guidance in relation to our body. We do not know much about the body, unless we move it. The movement is an important factor of unification of our body different parts and through it we come to a definite relationship with the outside world and with the objects, and only through the contact with the outside that we become able to correlate the various impressions about our body. The knowledge of our body depends, in large part, of our own action. Thus, since birth, the body postural model needs to be built. It is a creation and a construction, the production of a shape. The structuring process is only possible when it closely relates with the world experiences.

For Schilder (1935, p. 102), “The body image, in its final result, is a unit. But this unit is not rigid, but liable of transformation. And all the senses are always contributions to the body scheme creation”. In other words, the visual perceptions strongly influence the body image. The images change under the impulses and motor imagination influences. Schilder (1935) argues that these distortions are called metamorphosias. Among these, we have polyopia that would be the tendency to multiply the visual image, becoming larger (macropsia) or smaller (micropsia).

The Libidinal Structure of Body Image

Schilder uses the psychoanalytic theory to explain the libidinal structure of body image. In his understanding of the psychoanalytic work, Schilder (1935, p. 107) points out that “We are interested in our body integrity”. He claims that the libido belongs to our own body. He declares that, in principle, libido is given to the body as a whole. This is the narcissistic stage. In this phase, the child only cares for herself. This stage, referred to as primary narcissism, is followed by an autoerotic phase, in which the libido is focused on body parts that have special erogenous signification. Concomitantly to auto-erotism, Schilder describes the pre-genital and child genital phases.

The first phase or would be oral phase. In this, the milk intake occurs and the erogenous zone is the mouth. At this phase, the body tries to incorporate the outside world, which is only considered according to its ability to produce (or not) satisfaction. At this point, the child also enjoys the sensations from the skin. There is a cutaneous eroticism.

In the oral phase, aggression can also occur aiming to destroy the mother breast. This aggressiveness (and consequently, the sadism) can persist in the anal phase.

The second phase is the anal-sadistic phase. In this, there is pleasure in defecation and the erogenous zone is the anus. During this phase, the outside world receives an interest portion from the child, occurring anal, and homosexual tendencies in relation to external objects.

The third phase would be the phallic, which coincides with the Oedipus Complex (nuclear complex of the
psychic subject constitution). At this phase, the genitals acquire a new meaning and become the main libidinal zone in the body. At this phase, there is a complete understanding of the child’s body as something opposite to the outside world. After the end of the Oedipus complex, we have the secondary narcissism aspect, a moment when the libido is withdrawn from “outside world”.

According to Schilder reading, narcissism is seen as a large (libidinal) reservoir which lends part of its contents to the objects. The energy that was withdrawn from this reservoir can be brought back at any time. And what is the relationship between the primary narcissism and the body image? For Schilder (1935), any libido or energy of ego desires can only appear in connection with an object. We are in a world, and the objects are part of it. When we live, we are facing this world. There is always a person and this person attitude. An attitude is an attitude to something: The narcissistic libido object is the body image. But there is no doubt that our body can only exist as part of the world.

For the newborn, body and world are interconnected experiences. One is not possible without the other. In so primitive level, the boundary between body and world is not clearly defined. It will be easier to perceive a part of the body in the world than a part of the world in the body. Thus, the body will be projected in the world, and this will be introjected in the body. And in adulthood, body and world are in constant exchange.

Thus, at birth there is a zone of lack of differentiation between body and world. But the body image has to be developed and built. Libido is linked to the different parts of body image and, in various phases of libido development, the body model will continuously change.

In the body scheme overall structure, the erogenous zones will have a leading role. In other words, we can assume that the body image, during the oral phase of development, will be centered in the mouth and, in anal phase, in the anus. The libidinal flow of energy will greatly influence the body image. And during the body image construction, there will be a continuous interaction between ego and id.

**Erogenous Zones of Body Image**

For Schilder (1935, p. 142), “The own organs (of the body) force the individual to a continuous contact with the outside world, and there is no doubt that, at least in part, we discover our body through these contacts”. The enormous psychological importance of every orifice of the body is present since birth. Through the mouth we eat the food. And in adulthood, by means of certain cavities we eject urine, sexual products, faeces and air. In addition, the body surface is also an erogenous zone. The skin is easily irritable and, consequently, it is an irritation organ. There are continuous sensations that lead the child to touch or make people around him touch his skin.

It is very important to note that much of the body is discovered by the hands. In addition to the hand and look, the contact with the others (fathers, mothers, friends, and neighbors) and the interest that these demonstrate to the various parts of our body will be of huge importance for the development of the body postural model; since “whenever a part of our body image receives excessive importance, the symmetry and the internal balance of body image are destroyed” (Schilder, 1935, p. 113). Therefore, the organic pain (that leads the body model libidinal structure to change immediately), the organic diseases, the erogenous zones, our hands action on the body, the others actions regarding our body, and the others interest by our body are important factors for the body image final structuring.

In addition, the libidinal structures differences reflect in the body postural model structure. Individuals in whom a partial desire is increased will feel a certain point of the body, the particular erogenous zone belonging
to the desire, in the center of his body images, as if the energy was accumulated in certain points. There are energy lines connecting different erogenous zones and we will have variations in the body image structuring, according to the individual psychosexual tendencies.

For Schilder (1935, p. 159), “Every erogenous zone has typical extension lines”. In adulthood there is the extension of these erogenous zones to certain parts of the body. The anal zone extends to the back. The mouth, usually, extends to the interior plan. In other words, extends to the hands, mouth and nose inner part. Therefore, it is impossible to study the libidinal structure of body image in isolation. It is an integral part of the individual internal vital history and, to understand it, it is necessary to study the libidinal development since childhood. Thus, our body knowledge is developed based on the continuously renewed contact with the outside world since childhood, and the body image construction is based not only on the person individual story, but also in his relations with others.

For Schilder (1935, p. 164), “The body schema is a unit that not only incorporates parts of the outside world, but also waives these. There is not only a tendency to structure the body postural model, but also to destroy this image”. For example, when we eat food or drink, something from outside world is added to body image. After digestion, the intestinal movement just physically separates faeces from body, but psychologically, these continue to be part of us.

The anatomical configuration (of genital organs) plays an important role in body structure. A protuberance belongs less to the body; because whenever a body part connects less closely with the rest, there is a fear of losing it. It is the fear for body integrity, which is based on the postural model internal qualities.

In addition, the body postural model only remains stable for a short time, immediately changing. Probably, the psychic life figurations instability only connotes a passing phase with which the next phase can be contrasted. But there is no doubt that, in our psychic life, there are always tendencies to form units. But whenever a unit, a Gestalt is created, this immediately tends to change and destroy. Destruction is a partial phase of construction, which is a project and life general characteristic. Destroy to rebuild a new image.

Discussion

Libidinal Development of Body Image

Schilder, in his reading of Freudian work, points out that since the beginning of life there a nucleus of body image in the oral zone. Using Berfeld, Schilder (1935) admits that there is a primary development that begins in the oral zone and a secondary refinement that differentiates the body ego from the outside world. So, he points out:

We have reasons to believe that there is an internal development, a maturation in all fields of psychic life, and that there are internal factors in the organism relatively independent of the experiences that determine this evolution. The maturation process acquires its final form from the individual experiences, which will depend, largely, on the vital experience, training and emotional activities. (Schilder, 1935, p. 179)

Our body image is not always the same. The body image evolution is, somewhat, parallel to the perceptions, thoughts and object relations development.

Every desire and every libidinal trend change immediately the body image structure. In any attitude, we desire to modify the postural model or body scheme spatial relationship. The minute we see something, muscular actions start leading to changes in its perception. All impulse or desire modifies the body image, its
gravity and its mass. Thus, in every action and every desire we intend to obtain a body image change.

For Schilder (1935), “The body image can shrink or expand, can give its parts to outside world or seize upon parts of it” (p. 176). For example, the lips and face painting, hair discoloration and tattoo are attempts to change the body image. The meaning of all these changes of appearance is not always conscious; because there is a symbolic meaning, as for example, the skin cleaning can be considered an example of impulse to overcome unconscious anal tendencies.

In addition to hygiene, clothes became a part of body image. That is, any piece of clothes dressed becomes, immediately, part of the body image.

As the clothes are part of the body schema, these gain the same sense of body parts and can represent various symbolic meanings. Consequently, all transformations found in body image can be found in the clothes. This means that clothes can become a means to entirely change our body image; and when imitating a famous person’s clothes, we modify our postural image, incorporating others image. Therefore, the body images are not isolated entities. The body images community is the basis of all social function.

It is necessary to emphasize that body image passes through a continuous process of expansion and reduction. The primitive peoples and certain psychotic patients can modify body image through a simple process of libidinal imagination; for example, they transform an individual into a werewolf on the basis of their beliefs. People already considered “neurotic” only achieve minor “autoplastic” modifications through masks and clothes.

Humans are surrounded and curtailed by their body images. One of the reasons for the transformation and use of clothes is the desire to overcome the rigidity of body image, which can be transformed through paintings, jewelry, etc..

The body can also be modified as a whole. We can make holes in the body or insert metal or wood pieces in it, as it occurred with the primitive peoples.

According to Schilder (1935), “One can also try to modify the body image in a less violent way, through all kinds of gymnastics” (p. 179). So, the dance and gymnastics are ways to decrease the body postural model rigid shape. The dance leads to a disruption and a change of body image, leading us from a body image change to a psychic attitude change.

For Schilder (1935), we expand and contract the body postural model, we remove and add parts, we rebuild it; we mix details; create new details; we do this with our body and with its own expression. There is a construction and a destruction linked to the needs, conflicts and energy of the total personality. During the construction and destruction phases appear two basic human tendencies. One is the tendency to crystallize unities and ensure rest points, immutability and absence of change. The other is the tendency to obtain a continuous flow, a permanent change.

**Beauty and Body Image**

For Schilder (1935), “A beauty should be related to body postural model. When we consider the human figure beauty, we immediately realize that the aesthetic interest certainly relates closely with the interest in sex” (p. 128). The human being beauty does not cause the desires immediately, but it brings inside the seeds of desires development, since the human figure beauty has a direct relation with sexuality.

Beauty is a social phenomenon. The human body, its postural model, is the first object of plastic arts and painting. The beauty object causes sexual impulses without satisfying them; but, at the same time, allows
everyone to enjoy it. The beauty is, also, giving up your own claims to the benefit of all.

It is obvious that the aesthetic influence disappears when sexual desire becomes stronger. We come to the conclusion that the aesthetic object triggers instinctual attitudes, but such attitudes are prematurely inhibited and interrupted, so that the aesthetic pleasure, although it offers rest and relaxation, it does not allow a complete satisfaction of desires. Thus, this pleasure continues far from the ideal to be achieved.

The aesthetic object offers a promise and a semi-satisfaction of desires, and such desires are characterized as incompletely satisfied and unfinished by the fact that, in the aesthetic figure, more than a desire seeks expression and satisfaction.

The aesthetic effect consists in the fact that instinctive attitudes are caused, but not developed. That is, the aesthetic experiences are incomplete and can never be completed. The aesthetic object acquires its color when impounding the instinctive energy. The person who appreciates aesthetic experience enjoys the free movement of his desires, without assuming the appropriate responsibility for it.

For Schilder (1935), we should not underestimate the importance of beauty and ugliness in human life. Beauty can be a promise of complete satisfaction or a way to get such satisfaction. Our own beauty or ugliness does not take into account only the image that we have of ourselves, but also the image the others build about us, and which we will take back. Thus, the body image is the result of social life.

Certainly, beauty and ugliness are not isolated individual phenomena, but social phenomena of greater importance. Our own body image and that of others, their beauty or ugliness, become the basis of our sexual and social activities.

For Schilder (1935), “The beauty concept is directly related to each people culture” (p. 235). The beauty standard is always the libidinal expression of a society, such as the deformation practices adopted in the primitive societies.

When we structure the individual and others body image, we always tend to build something static that soon will be dissolved again. We always return to the body primary positions. When we think of a person running, we see him changing from a primary position to another primary position. That is, the primary positions are the relative rest position, the moment that the movement is not considered, but yes the postural model crystallized unit.

We should realize that our and others body image is not just a body image at rest, but a body image in motion. But the beauty is especially connected with the body image at rest, with the cover images of certain fashion magazines. And that is why we are so surprised when seeing an isolated phase of a movement in an old photograph.

The Body Image Three-Dimensionality

Schilder (1935) considers the body as a unit, but points out that to understand the body image, we have to consider the three-dimensional aspect: the world, the body, and the mind. Schilder (1935) says: “It would be wrong to try to dissolve them in a cluster of isolated parts. We have three categories… of world, body and personality” (p. 246).

In the construction of body image it is essential the contact with the external reality, because all experiences with external reality already modify the most primitive body image imaginable. Parts of these experiences are accepted or not. Thus, the body image is continuously built through levels and layers, taking into consideration past and present experiences (such as memory and learning).
For Schilder (1935), “To build the body image, we need to know where are the different members of our body” (p. 249). The body postural model, the members’ knowledge and their mutual relations are necessary to start any movement.

The body postural model finds its expression clearer in the phantom members of people who have lost their members more or less abruptly. An attitude regarding the phantom member shows that people affected with the loss of a member wish to recreate the body integrity. Certain experiments and observations of amputated people show that they contain in themselves the amputated member phantom.

The postural model is modified to each object that touches the body. This model also has relation with the postural model of people around us. In addition, the emotional life has an important role in the final form of body postural model, as it will change the relative value and the clarity of the various parts of the body image, according to the libidinal tendencies.

This change may be a surface change, but also an internal body change. The libidinal structure is expressed in the emphasis given to the different parts of postural model and in appearances resulting from its shapes. What happens in one part of the body can be transposed to another. That is, the female sexual organ cavity can appear as cavity in other parts of the body. The male sexual organ can be represented by earrings, piercings in other parts of the body.

Schilder (1935) calls this a transposition from a body region to another. Therefore, a part of the body can symbolize another part, such as the nose can take the importance of the phallus. Any protruding part can become a symbol of the male sexual organ. The body cavities and orifices can be exchanged by each other freely. The vagina, anus, mouth, ears, and even the nose cavities belong to the same group of orifices.

Conclusion

We elaborate our body image according to the experiences gain through the actions and attitudes, as well as by words or acts directed to our body. In addition, the others attitudes towards their own bodies will also have a major influence on our body image.

We can take other people’s body parts and incorporate them into our body image. This is called personalization. Thus, the identification of the group where this subject is inserted, the projection of individual fantasies to the outside world, and the personalization have a prominent role in the construction of an individual body image.

In addition to these three aspects, Schilder also points out that libidinal conflicts constantly change body image. There is a tendency to keep the body image within its bounds, and another to expand and extend it. There is also a tendency to keep their parties united and dissipate them all over the world. So, the movement and the expression belong to destructive phases in the continuous process of changes in the body postural model.

Based on this work, it can be concluded that the erotic changes in body image are always a social phenomena, and followed by the corresponding phenomena in the body image of others. There is a constant exchange between parts of our own body image and the parts of others body image. This means that there is a projection and a personalization. But the others body image totality (such as friends and neighbors) can be taken in the identification with them; as well as the totality of our body image can be projected to outside.

Therefore, a discussion on body image as an isolated entity is necessarily incomplete. A body is always the expression of an ego, of a personality, and it is inserted into a world. Even a preliminary response to the
body problem cannot be given, unless we try a preliminary response on the personality and the world. In other words, for a body image study, any researcher is expected to give prominence to the psychological, physiological and sociological aspects of body image, i.e., its three-dimensionality.

Reference