Lack of Documentation on the Phenomenon of Body Shaming in Romania. In Search of a method...

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Abstract: My research is based mainly on the vast phenomenon that we call body shaming. Although it has existed for a long time in social interactions, the phenomenon has inevitably spread much faster with the evolution of social media platforms, and is part of the wide range of contemporary psycho-somatic disorders. In a first analysis of the subject, we can formulate the false impression that body shaming is an isolated manifestation of negative remarks, about one individual's weight by another, in order to denigrate it. But if we look at the depth of the psychic processes that arise from such an interaction, we see that, in fact, body shaming has far more complex implications in everyday life. For example, certain verbal expressions we use daily can become triggers of bodily trauma to those around us, without our intention having any derogatory purpose. Internationally, the phenomenon has already raised some question marks among psychologists and industries that include working with body shapes, thus forming an opportunity to study the triggering mechanisms of body shaming, its forms and the effects it can have on an individual. Society itself has become familiar with the harmful effects and has developed an ability to censor itself in such situations. In Romania, however, the phenomenon is just beginning to be introduced into society as a real problem of the 21st century, research on it being even less common.

Keywords: body shaming; theatre; dance.

The research that I intend to carry out is mainly based on the vast phenomenon known as *body shaming*. Although it has existed for a long time in social interactions, the phenomenon has inevitably spread a lot faster together with the evolution of the social media platforms, and is a part of the wide range of contemporary psychosomatic disorders. "Body shaming (BS) is a popular term for a type of negative social interaction, which frequently occurs in social media. However, there is a lack of a clear scientific definition of BS and data on its relation to other concepts in social aggression research."[1]

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[1] Constanze Schlüter, Gerda Kraag, Jennifer Schmidt, *Body Shaming: An Exploratory Study on its Definition and Classification*, in "International Journal of Bullying Prevention", Vol. 5, 2021, retrieved from

A preliminary analysis on the topic could give us the false impression that *body shaming* is an isolated manifestation of certain negative remarks made by an individual about another individual's weight, with the purpose of denigrating the latter. However, if we regard the psychic processes emerged from such an interaction more profoundly, we notice that, in fact, *body shaming* has much more complex implications in everyday life. For instance, certain verbal utterances which we use every day, even without having a deprecatory purpose, can become elements leading to corporality related trauma to those around us. "When feeling shame about one's body image one may perceive oneself as having unattractive, defective and rejectable physical attributes and thus that one may stand at risk of being put down, excluded, passed by, or even harmed by others. Body image concealment or avoidance of situations of possible negative scrutiny by others may then be adopted as defensive outputs to protect the self of such presumed social threats, leading however to increased distress and invalidation in one's life."[2]

The phenomenon has already raised questions, worldwide, among psychologists and the industries, which deal with body shape; this results into an opportunity of studying the triggers of *body shaming*, its forms and possible effects on an individual. Society itself has become familiar with the damaging effects of *body shaming* and has developed a capacity of censorship in such situations. In Romania, on the other hand, the phenomenon is only beginning to be considered as a true problem of the 21st century, while the research on the topic is scarce. This is exactly why, by relating with the capacity of dance to facilitate the therapy of certain psychological disorders, I intend to carry out a detailed research aiming to obtain, as a result, a well-structured and demonstrated methodological mechanism able to make the problem known, and to offer a few viable solutions.

Body shaming – a real problem of everyday society

The same as in the case of *bullying* or other toxic social interactions, there is a constant question whether these constitute real issues or simply isolated misdeeds done by an individual in relation with the others, misdeeds which can be solved or not, but which do not influence in any way the psyche of those who participated in them, voluntarily or not. After a series of

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https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356067936_Body_Shaming_an_Exploratory_Study_on_its_Definition_and_Classification

[2] Cristiana Duarte, José Pinto-Gouveia, Cláudia Ferreira, *Escaping from body image shame and harsh self-criticism: Exploration of underlying mechanisms of binge eating*, "Eating Behaviors", Vol. 15, 2014, pp. 638-643, retrieved from

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265855303_Escaping_from_body_image_shame_and_harsh_self-criticism_Exploration_of_underlying_mechanisms_of_binge_eating

detailed research, psychologists have reached the conclusion that such social interactions generate deep trauma in the psychic evolution of the individual, and, thus, intervention in ameliorating or even eliminating them is required.

> As we asked for the initial understanding of body shaming, the majority of participants agreed that body shaming refers to negative body-related comments, mostly in the form of insults. These verbal or written offenses mostly take place online, but they can also occur in real life. Additionally, participants felt that the severity of comments could vary from well-intended to harmful. Most participants agreed that body shaming has negative consequences for the victim, for example, bad feelings, impairments in self-esteem as well as social exclusion and stigmatization. Taken together, our participants' initial understanding of body shaming largely overlapped with our proposed definition. Therefore, most of them agreed with it.[3]

The solutions suggested are much more present in the case of *bullying*, for example, than in the case of *body shaming*, which is a branch that encompasses, in its structure, everything that means negative discourse strictly related to the human body. Although some forms of *body shaming* have been around since ancient times, society, especially the western one, is only now beginning to show a particular attention to the phenomenon and to truly consider it as an impediment in the healthy development of the individual. I believe that the term *shame*, at least metaphorically, has always had a place near the term *body*, if we consider the human desire of always being better, more famous, closer to the other who we see as the corporal ideal. It is normal, depending on the mentality of the society in which we live, for this ideal to change. If we regard the visual representations from painting and photography during time, we will notice that the image of the "perfect" body has suffered drastic changes. Nowadays, because of the information which flows much more rapidly, changes of this sort occur in a rapid pace and are more and more diverse. At this point, with the evolution of technology, social media platforms emerge, where *bullying* and, implicitly, *body shaming*, happen more easily. The two become subcategories of *cyberbullying*.

> Internet search engine use shows that the term "body shaming" has become increasingly popular in the public. The frequency of the search term in Google shows a steady increase during the past 5 years. According to a study conducted by Yahoo Health with 2000 participants aged 13-64 years, 94% of adolescent females and 64% of

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[3] Constanze Schlüter, Gerda Kraag, Jennifer Schmidt, *op. cit.*

adolescent males experienced being shamed online related to their bodies.[4]

Body shaming, a real problem of the Romanian society

Although the matter is already topical, especially in western societies, where the stage of accepting and getting to know the phenomenon has passed and they have reached the stage of finding solutions to the problem, in Romania there isn't a complex and applied study capable of offering a radiogram of the attitudes that the individuals have in relation with their own body and with the bodies of the others. In most of the cases, the body represents either a taboo, or a way in which one could determine the other to feel inferior, but we do not have the exercise of building a relationship with the body, to understand it, to listen to it and to think more about it. In order to begin to acknowledge what this phenomenon of *body shaming* really is, we must first learn to accept, little by little, the trauma and insecurities that we ourselves have and of which we are sometimes unaware. This is the stage of the current Romanian society, that of acknowledging our own problems in relation with our body and the fact that the others have the same problems, which we could aggravate if we spoke in a certain way or expressed an inappropriate opinion. We notice, actually, that the Romanian language does not have a term with the capacity to include what *body shaming* really is, as we are bound to use the English phrase. This demonstrates that, at least for the moment, the isn't enough interest in what concerns this important topic of our society. I am saying this from experience, as my debut performance, *KARNAL*, was based precisely on the issue of *body shaming*; through the discussions I had with the performers about their experiences with their own bodies, and from the feedback that I received from the public, I have reached the conclusion that, for the moment, it is necessary to make the phenomenon and its instances known and to create a context in which people can come and interact with their trauma and with those of the others. The experience of this performance was unique: it was for the first time when I really felt that my artistic product could acquire therapeutic characteristics, without the spectator being actively involved in the action. Then I decided that I wanted to develop this branch, to use what I had learned about choreographic art in order to help the others at least begin a process of healing through motion. The most evident proof was, undoubtedly, the therapeutic process that we, the performers, went through during the development of the performance. We managed to collectively treat our childhood insecurities, and we found the best methods of getting over the fear of being exposed on the stage, not only metaphorically, but also practically, through the naked body. Another

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[4] Constanze Schlüter, Gerda Kraag, Jennifer Schmidt, *op. cit.*

important aspect which we discovered during the development of the performance was that transforming one's purported disadvantages into advantages is an efficient method of beginning the process of accepting one's own body. For instance, an overweight body can be transformed into a feature of scenic power, *i.e.* dominating the space through a prominent presence. In the performance, I made use of this contrast and placed a body which society might consider "well shaped" in a relation of scenic inferiority with an overweight body. The desired effect was achieved and the trust given to the performer helped him overcome the complex of corporality and use it in a positive manner.

I have also noticed that, along with the psychic process we all went through, the physical motion and the fact that the performers were doing something consistent with their bodies which they believed to be unsuited for dance, simply brought a change in their mentality and state of being of that time. Since several studies have shown that physical exercise facilitates the ordering of the relation with the body, I somehow expected this reaction, but I was truly surprised by the power that dance had to modify the psyche. The concentration with which they approached the technical movements and the corporal expressivity became infinitely important in comparison with the shame and discomfort. "A study by Daubenmeir (2005) found that yoga practitioners reported more body responsiveness, more body awareness, lower self-objectification, greater body satisfaction, and fewer disordered eating attitudes than those participating in aerobic or nonaerobic exercise."[5]

I strongly believe that my experience can be used to help other people in this complex process and this is precisely why I intend to structure the information in a clear, concrete and practical method through detailed research on the topic. It is necessary to make contact with people coming from different social environments, of different ages, with certain disabilities, as all of these aspects are part of the discussion about *body shaming*. I do not think that the final purpose should be the total removal of the term *shame*, as I assume that sometimes, the shame of what the body could become in comparison with what it is today (I am referring to the responsibility of corporal health rather than hunger) might determine people to take action in this respect. Human nature is most of the time neglectful and inattentive, and an impulse such as the one given by shame can be useful sometimes. In fact, in western societies, there is talk about the reduction of the *body shaming* phenomena which should not go to the

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[5] K. Alysse Bailey, Larkin Lamarch, Kimberley L. Gammage, Philip J. Sullivan, *Self-Objectification and the Use of Body Image Coping Strategies: The Role of Shame in Highly Physically Active Women*, "The American Journal of Psychology", Vol. 129, No. 1, Spring 2016, pp. 81-90, retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/amerjpsyc.129.1.0081

other extreme, *i.e.* to encourage unhealthy bodies. Shame can be diminished and brought to a level of self-awareness, and placed next to other terms such as self-esteem, acceptance, understanding, terms which need to be more present in our mentality.

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Annexes

Photos from the *KARNAL* performance. Credit: Alexandra Iftime