Fluidity and Interactivity Between Body and Sense of Self: An Anthropological Approach to Cosmetic Surgery in Japan

KAWAZOE Hiroko

This paper, which is based on interviews with cosmetic surgery patients in Japan and Korea, will examine the fluid and interactive relationship between body and sense of self on the part of the patient.

The body is a cultural artifact, forged by different cultural practices such as hair styling, make-up, tattooing, piercing, and of course cosmetic surgery. Body-mind dualism has allowed medicine and science to treat the body as an object, liberating people in modern society from traditional norms. Modern medical cosmetic surgery is advancing and has gained popularity because of our modern mindset.

The expansion of cosmetic surgery raises questions. Foucauldian feminists criticize normative feminine practices such as cosmetic surgery, arguing that male dominance and female subordination is reproduced through "self-normalization" in regard to everyday habits of masculinity and femininity. Other feminists see women who undergo cosmetic surgery as agents trying to "renegotiate" their identities through their bodies within the constraints of a gendered social order.

These two perspectives may appear to be conflicting, but can be seen as head and tail of the same coin—namely the modern Western individual seen as independent of society. In this framework, the self of a cosmetic surgery patient can be viewed as either subordinate to society or as being regenerated regardless of others after an operation.

However, my research on patients before and after surgery indicated the importance of situation and relationships, and of getting used to a new sense of body, social interaction, and personal relationships. Before surgery, the body and the sense of self of patients is fixed on the body parts that they see as problematic, constantly affecting the way they interact with people and how they feel in public. After surgery, patients tend to forget their former appearance relatively quickly, which suggests that the relationship between the body and the sense of self can be very fluid. However, technical success is not the be-all and end-all of cosmetic surgery, which in Japan is a marginal field of medical practice. Most patients keep their operations secret from people around them, and as they gradually become accustomed to their still painful and unfamiliar new bodies, they also get used to interacting with others and reading their reactions. They therefore come to adopt new feelings and
ways of social and personal interaction, and relationships.

Some patients later develop new dissatisfactions. We are surrounded by the mass media and face a constant barrage of messages demanding conformity with society’s image of perfection and standard beauty care. We easily identify with two-dimensional images through photos, mirrors and so forth and evaluate our own value, but I have found that some patients reflect on previous values and attitudes.

My research findings as presented in this article suggest that the body and the sense of self are fluid and interactive, emerging from situations and relationships.

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