

“Some young people who are already self-mutilating in private . . . graduate to the extreme forms of what are now called ‘body modification.’”

Body Modification Is a Form of Self-Mutilation

Sheila Jeffreys

Cutting one’s own flesh, body piercing, tattooing, and cosmetic surgery are all forms of self-mutilation which should be opposed, argues Sheila Jeffreys in the following viewpoint. Increasingly, self-harm is perpetrated by surgeons who capitalize on society’s rejection of certain body types and its condemnation of homosexuality, she points out. For example, those who are ashamed of their physical features or who believe they are the wrong sex can find professionals to mutilate their bodies for a profit. In addition, self-mutilators sometimes become drawn to more dangerous forms of body modification, such as tongue-splitting and amputation. Jeffreys is an associate professor of political science at the University of Melbourne.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. What does Jeffreys mean by “self-mutilation by proxy”?

Sheila Jeffreys, “Body Modification as Self-Mutilation by Proxy,” *On Line Opinion*, April 10, 2006. Reproduced by permission.

Self-Mutilation

2. What is the origin of breast enlargement, according to the author?
3. How much was the U.S. cosmetic industry worth in the year 2003, according to Jeffreys?

The cutting up that girls do secretly in their bedrooms, the nipple piercing that is performed in high street studios, breast implant surgery, sex reassignment surgery, are connected. They are all forms of self-mutilation, and increasingly the cutting is carried out by proxies for a profit. They are responses to low social status, sexual and physical abuse or severe emotional distress created by a male dominant society which does not accept women's varied body shapes or condemns homosexuality.

Who Self-Mutilates?

Self-mutilation is overwhelmingly the behaviour of girls and young women. Its most common form is cutting of the forearm with razors, or other sharp implements, though other areas of the body can be injured. It is a common behaviour. An estimated two million young women in the US regularly self-mutilate. Girls and women who have no outlet for the rage and pain they experience from male violence and abuse and from the other injuries of a male dominant culture, attack their own bodies.

Often they are emotionally disassociated from their bodies, having learnt this technique to survive abuse. Self-mutilation breaches the barriers they have created and allows them to "feel". The frequency of self-mutilation by young women fits into a context of increasing mental and physical health problems in teenage girls.

Fashionable Forms of Self-Mutilation

I call the practices in which women, and some men, request others to cut up their bodies—as in cosmetic surgery, transsexual surgery, amputee identity disorder (pursuit of limb