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A CONVERSATION WITH BRIE MATHERS: LEARNING TO VALUE OUR BODIES AND OURSELVES

Interviewed by Riane Eisler, JD, PhD(hon)

Abstract

IJPS Editor-in-Chief Riane Eisler interviews Brie Mathers, director of the organization *Love the Skin You're In*, about her work to change how girls and women see themselves in the cultural transformation to a healthier, more equitable partnership society.

Keywords: body image, health, mindfulness, media literacy, gender construction, Internet safety, cyber-bullying, self-advocacy, digital citizenry, hyper-sexualization, human trafficking, partnership

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Riane Eisler: Thank you so much, Brie, for your willingness to be part of this fourth issue of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*. I want to start by thanking you for your important work. You have given your body-image multimedia presentations at schools worldwide to many thousands of girls, and more recently also to boys, inspiring them to find compassion within themselves and empathy for others by teaching them media literacy and mindfulness. What in your own life experiences led you to this work?

Brie Mathers: Recovery from anorexia as a young adult awakened me from the cultural trance. It was a wide-eyed awakening for a 17-year-old. I viscerally felt the body loathing that has become a rite of passage into womanhood for many girls. When I looked at my peers, I saw girls saturated by a hotbed of media imagery before they had the maturity to moderate their understanding of it.

It wasn't just me. The statistics are staggering. Anorexia is the #1 killer of teen girls in America (Wolf, 2002). According to the Council on Size and Weight Discrimination, girls are more afraid of getting fat than they are of cancer, nuclear war, or losing a parent. We have an insane situation: half the world is obsessed with being overweight while the other half is starving.

It took a village of partnership thinkers to inoculate me against harmful media messaging. My very committed family helped me take the first steps. Then, Women's Studies at McGill University lit me up. As I absorbed the words of Gloria Steinem, bell hooks, Naomi Wolf, and you, Riane, a sense of possibility for women in the world grew fertile. A vision arose *for young women to be able to read images* as much as they are taught to read words. I felt the call to activism, heeded my mother's encouragement, and haven't looked back.

Eisler: We know that girls and women in many cultures have been socialized to remake their bodies to conform to images of what is culturally defined as desirable to men -- from the deforming of girls' feet to stubs that make it almost impossible to walk, practiced not so long ago in China, and the genital mutilations/cutting still practiced in parts of Africa and the Middle East today, to the more recent expectation that girls' must at all cost look like the models in Western women's magazines. So I wonder how girls react to your message.

Mathers: Every day, I receive messages from young women asking for advice, or sharing a story of how my talk reshaped their vision of themselves, or asking about career choices. I could not ask for more. The experience is nothing short of magic. When you tap that wellspring in youth, social change comes to life. Young women are highly responsive and are ever the inspiration for what I do.

After seeing my talk at a middle school in rural Ontario, Canada, girls hosted a Girl Power day in their gym. When I arrived, I was pulled into the entrance by the school

sign that read “Welcome Brie.” I was met enthusiastically at the door by several young women and ushered into the gym, which had become inspirational grrrrl-land. The walls were laced with motivational quotes, 600 cupcakes were stacked on the back table alongside 600 glasses of pink lemonade. There is no describing what it felt like to walk into a venue where the message you want to convey is already being upheld by sixty resilient hosts. They dragged me over to the mural along the back wall and my eyes went wet with light as I took in their art work; the strength of its messaging reflected back to me the scope and complexity of their beings. I realized that modeling what we want to see more of can lead the way out of the complex labyrinth that’s become girl culture. I witnessed that girls want to take a stand against industries that gorge on profit out of feelings of female inadequacy. Girls also want to change the world - they had turned their event into a fundraiser for girls across the globe!

Eisler: What recent factors do you see that promote the negative self-images so many girls and women internalize?

Mathers: In recent years we have witnessed a digital transformation of childhood. According to a report by Common Sense Media, teens spend nine hours daily online, while tweens spend six. This means that between social media, gaming, texting, TV viewing, and music, youth spend more hours glued to their screens than they do sleeping. As the dominant intermediary in their life, how can this not shape everything?

The propaganda is everywhere. Reality TV, which is like Disney Princess narratives on steroids, revives regressive ideals for women, then touts it as real modern-day romance. Instagram feeds, where photos by the hundreds scroll and FOMO (acronym for fear of missing out) reigns supreme, make it is easy for girls to trade away their delicate individuality for the false promise that personal power and happiness can be found in self-objectification. Studies show that 90% of 12-year-olds are watching

mainstream pornography, which is then laying down their neurology for unhealthy intimacy. Dating sites such as Tinder reinforce hook-up culture. Real intimacy, orgasms, and oral pleasure are disproportionately out. So there is greater need now than ever for your book, *Sacred Pleasure: Sex, Myth, and the Politics of the Body* (Eisler, 1995), because as young women increasingly relate to their bodies as commodities, sex has become increasingly physically and emotionally unsafe.

But raising the discussion of hyper-sexualization with a room full of hundreds of teen girls is a fine line. In recent years, I have embraced the handful of girls who have challenged my sharing of related research as “slut-shaming.” Because while we unequivocally want to affirm young women’s agency over their own sexual expression, never has the conversation around the impact of self-objectification been more salient - or more poignant, with significant health consequences: decreased condom use, decreased sexual assertiveness, and increased body shame, depression, and disordered eating. (Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 2006).

Eisler: Why do you think girls are so susceptible to these media messages, even at the cost of their physical and mental health? What information and insights can help us change this?

Mathers: When we began filming our documentary *You Got This - Owning Body Image*, we discovered some answers to this question. Girls become vulnerable to the media’s siren call in grades five or six when they begin making comparisons between themselves and these idealized stereotypes they see. The fear of becoming fat sets in as the natural process of blossoming into a woman’s body (young women’s body weight is supposed to double during adolescence) has been co-opted by the industries into “getting fat.” Then, around grade eight they encounter a new social situation, perhaps a summer camp or just hanging out at the community pool, and they wonder who they are and who they should be. In this period of introspection, a pattern of mirror-gazing arises. They stare at the perceived flaws and imperceptibly the way

they see themselves begins to change. Their TV, movie, and pop stars often dress like sex workers alongside a culture of ever-present hyper-sexuality and pornography. Teen girls are simply at the end of a very long and twisted skein. By high school they have been culturally encoded with the message that their looks are more important than their brain or their personality.

Eisler: What actions can we take to change unhealthy social attitudes that cause such terrible harm?

Mathers: Studies show that social media, though it can be harmful, is an influential tool for cultural transformation. As hashtag campaigns set out to change the world, we are gaining traction. For example, in 2014, the Super Bowl flaunted some of the most brutally sexist advertising ever. The *#notbuyingit* campaign gave power to our collective voices, as women and men tweeted at corporations promoting objectification and denigration of women. Companies listened, and in 2015 we witnessed a much more promising and responsible wave of advertisements. We saw Indo-American comedian Mindy Kaling calling out minority invisibility as *Always* unveiled their *#likeagirl* campaign. Miss Representation launched the *#askhermore* campaign to command recognition of women's accomplishments. *Because I Am a Girl* in Canada will launch a *#liftherup* campaign this March. *Love the Skin You're In* is an ally to the *#truthinads* campaign.

Legislation is another powerful tool. With bipartisan U.S. Congressional sponsorship, the Truth in Advertising Act of 2016 (HR4445) calls on the Federal Trade Commission to develop a legislative framework for any advertising that materially alters images of the human body (i.e. shape, size, proportion, color, etc.). The bill directs the FTC, as the nation's consumer protection agency, to develop recommendations and remedies for these photo-shopped ads that are false and deceptive and/or linked to a series of emotional, psychological, and physical health issues and economic consequences - particularly affecting, but not limited to, girls and women.

Educational awareness, such as our documentary project, inspires young women to reclaim lost narratives about their bodies, to practice mindfulness, to own and share their stories of resiliency, and to build healthy relationships, because the power of connection - and partnership - is another antidote (Sanftner, JL, Tantillo, M, Seidlitz, CS., 2004). Additionally, the father-daughter relationship has a strong impact on the self-esteem of adolescent girls (McHale, Susan M., Crouter, Ann C, Tucker, Corinna J., 1999). When hurting young women reach out to me after my talks, I surround them with peer mentors from my teen social media team and watch their hearts come back to life. “Killing it with kindness” is how we roll at *Love the Skin You’re In*. lovetheskinyourein.net

Our educational talks need to nourish the interpersonal and intrapersonal connection young women need in order to stay healthy, form strong bonds with one another, and reach their full potential, while teaching boys to find power in respect and empathy. The opposite of objectification (domination system thinking) is empathy (partnership system thinking). Male, female, trans, or gender-fluid, there is a need to uproot the self-destructive doubt that emerges out of the commoditization of our bodies.

Once all beings are free to realize and express a full range of human emotions, we will know a humanity that is free to champion respect and resiliency. Teaching mindfulness and group empathy equips boys and girls with the social and emotional skills they need in order to thrive personally and become leaders of a more caring, just world. In Scandinavian countries where these stereotypes are breaking down, we see increasing paternity leave and the valuing of work traditionally performed by women.

Eisler: What role has mindfulness played in your story, and how do you bring mindfulness to your audience?

Mathers: As a top Canadian runner seduced by implausible beauty ideals at 16, a voice in my head shouted at me to lose the fat. My mind became my lying, tyrannical master and I its faithful servant, regardless of the profanities it hurled at me. I ran harder, longer, faster against an increasingly diminishing caloric intake. My muscles dwindled and a strangely undiagnosable exercise-induced asthma set in. My heart rate plummeted to 36 beats per minute. It took a very committed family to corral me into therapy for anorexia and, when they did, suffice it to say, the real games began.

I relinquished the dominator/totalitarian régime inside my head through a tried, true, and consistent dedication to sitting upright on my Zen cushion and paying mindful attention. As I changed what it was like to be *in* my body, I observed a personal experiment in neuro-plasticity. More than a transformation of self-image, something was happening internally that was to have a lasting effect on the fabric of my experience. The momentum of disparaging thought patterns gradually fell away and my intelligence was no longer hostage to the rote thinking habits that occupied too much mental bandwidth during my adolescence. I had discovered the inner work of partnership.

When I see gymnasiums teeming with young women, I can teach them that they are not their thoughts- that they can open around their feelings, free their brains and own their intelligence because I have engaged this process deeply. Every time we experience the contraction of a thought, we can open to the space in which it arises and send it on its way. This has been my secret elixir: an inner strength has replaced what for so long seemed fragile.

The most amazing part of our work is the deep and immediate way our audience connects to the message: the moments of realization that arise as individuals look around and see that, instead of being alone, their deep emotions are shared by

everyone in the room. We catalyze this “aha” moment of realization that we are not alone, we deserve more, and there is something bigger that we all belong to.

Eisler: How do the objectification of girls and women and unrealistic ideals of body image affect boys and men?

Mathers: As we airbrush the life out of already stereotypically beautiful models, we reinforce a dehumanizing mythology around the female body and women. Men ingest this imagery and can come to feel a sense of entitlement to women’s bodies, which in turn reinforces the rape culture which is so rampant.

Where body image is concerned, men are also victims of the domination paradigm. Expectations for male bodies have reached Incredible Hulk proportions. Male bodies are waxed, abs photo-shopped, and biceps now look bigger than real men’s actual heads. It is no wonder that 16% of high school boys currently suffer from disordered eating.

Eisler: How do stereotypes of femininity and masculinity affect society?

Mathers: Today’s toxic “man up” culture has arisen out of strait jacket gender constructions. Pressure to appear in control, compete to win, and exert toughness over softer, stereotypically feminine traits like vulnerability and empathy is alienating for men, who must define their manhood by that which is “not feminine.” These cultural stereotypes present a narrow spectrum of emotion for young men to embody. The most glaring examples are all across the world when it comes to conflict resolution, business, politics, and most high-profile world-changing endeavors. Rarely are the best qualities of feminine and masculine expressed in day-to-day determinations about policy and procedures. A chaotic, terrifying world is the obvious by-product.

Similarly, women who display stereotypically male traits, such as toughness and strength, are often still ostracized. The social media spree that scrutinized Serena Williams' physique after her Wimbledon performance this past summer is one example. Emma Watson said it best in her United Nations speech: "Both men and women should feel free to be sensitive. Both men and women should feel free to be strong."

Eisler: You have said your work is part of a larger social shift toward a healthier, more equitable partnership society. Can you say a few words about that?

Mathers: In my talks I expose the domination system ethos rampant in the corporate world, then bring partnership forward as the remedy, that like the flower that grows through the cracks in the sidewalk, shows the indomitable power of life.

I inspire young women to bond together against the domination system paradigm by making engaged partnership a practice. It is something that they do. For example, when I post a Tumblr comment or slide of a bully's comments about someone's body, we look at how fragile mental health feels on the inside. With another one, we deconstruct photo-shop. We also talk about how to interrupt the messages, as more than half of bullying situations stop when a peer intervenes on behalf of the student being bullied (Hawkins, Pepler, and Craig, 2001). Love, after all, is a verb. The more we collectively view the universality of how we as humans experience suffering, the greater our potential for empathy. Teaching youth partnership principles such as connection, compassion, solidarity, inclusion, and community is the cornerstone of *Love the Skin You're In*.

For the most part, my work is joyous, more about opening minds than repairing them. If we nurture mental health and open cultural systems early, teach youth to hold a mindful pen when writing the stories of their lives, and remind them of the power of

choice, they can turn away from the habit of objectification and reclaim caring for themselves and others as full human beings of substance and complexity.

In your closing paragraphs of *The Chalice and the Blade* (Eisler, 1987), you reference what a partnership world can look like: an earth marked by compassionate, equitable rule. It was very interesting to me that you wrote of a world that teaches the highest forms of yoga and meditation and awareness of our interconnection. It is this deeply felt sense of the interconnectedness of all of life that inspires me. Using the partnership model, we can lift the veils on ubiquitous media and bullying and remind youth of the power of empathy, mutuality, and care. A softening happens in the hallways after our talks. The faces open, the heads are held higher. This is the power of real connection. This is partnership in action.

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Brie Mathers: Since graduating with distinction from McGill University in Women's Studies and Humanistic Studies, Brie Mathers has spoken to 70,000 teen girls worldwide with her multi-media event *Love the Skin You're In*. Inspiring young women to find compassion within themselves and for one another, and to lead a new conversation about their bodies and beings, she conducts connective school-wide body image events about media literacy, mindfulness, and partnership. Author of *Freedom to Blossom*, Brie lives in Muskoka, Ontario, Canada.

Riane Eisler is president of the Center for Partnership Studies (CPS), Editor in Chief of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*, and author of numerous books, including *The Chalice and the Blade*, *Tomorrow's Children*, *The Real Wealth of Nations*, and most recently (with Teddie Potter), *Transforming Interprofessional Partnerships*. She keynotes conferences worldwide and consults on applications of the partnership model introduced in her work. For more information, see www.rianeeisler.com

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