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# Re-thinking the relationship between self and other: Levinas and narratives of beautifying the body

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## Abstract

In the consumer research literature, the automatic consideration of one's knowledge of self in the evaluation of others is taken for granted. The 'idea of the other' – which the authors here term 'representational subjectivity' – is at the heart of consumer decisions. Philosopher Emanuel Levinas suggests another path: the concrete relation to the other person is the basis of subjectivity. He makes the distinction between 'other' (as in environment and things) and 'Others' as in persons. Affective subjectivity arises in the enjoyment of things around an individual and precedes representation. Ethical subjectivity makes an individual realize that not everything can be assimilated to the self. It is in this moment that ethical subjectivity is realized. The authors explain these themes in the realm of beauty, a domain where ongoing moral judgments are made. The authors offer a correction to the taken-for-granted relationship between the self and the other with a focus on the pre-reflective affective self and the ethical self, each of which is shaken out of its complacency with the appearance of another person.

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To find will in any phenomenon requires a certain empathy; we observe a man's actions and place ourselves partly but not wholly in his position; or we act, and place ourselves partly in position as an outsider. (T.S. Eliot, 1964: 81)

The concept of the self is regarded as central to understanding consumer behavior (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Slater, 1997). It is taken for granted that everybody has a self (Belk, 1988) which evolves over time, and that the pursuit of identity is a core concern for each individual, bolstered through the use of products, ideas, people and objects (Hearn, 2008; Murray, 2002; Schouten, 1991; Therkelsen and Gram, 2008; Thompson and Haytko, 1997). The concept of an incarnate self – although not always specified – is also evident in discussions of identity formation and conflicts (Ahuvia, 2005; Joy and Sherry, 2003; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). Identity has been viewed at the individual level as well as the interdependent level, although it is generally accepted that cultures may emphasize one or the other (Joy, 2001). Group identity has also been studied at the level of subcultures, reference groups, families and virtual communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Tyler, 2009). In discussions of the self (individual or group) there is always an implied or actual other who makes an individual realize (to her/his dismay) that he/she is not alone. This other has been primarily described as a specific or generalized other in most discussions of identity formation, although reflexive evaluations of self are also the result of imagined or projected appraisals (Belk et al., 2003).

More recently, the discussion has focused on the 'undesirable self' as a way of talking about identity vis-à-vis the despised other, through processes of aversion, avoidance or even abandonment of products (Hogg et al., 2008). Not surprisingly, consumer researchers and marketing practitioners recognize the pursuit and protection of self-enhancement, self-preservation and self-esteem as one of the most important drivers for consumer decision making (Sirgy, 1982).

There is a fundamental assumption being made in the consumer literature that individuals use self-knowledge and egocentric experience to reason about others. Egoism can be based on desire (e.g. the good life lies in getting what one wants whenever one wants it) or on interests (e.g. promoting what is in one's long-term interests) (Desmond and Crane, 2004: 1223). Epley, Waytz and Cacioppo (2007: 868) argue that correction to egocentrism is possible, if individuals have the capacity, motivation and right representations about others to do so.

Even when such correction happens, it is achieved on a try-and-see basis until a satisfactory value is reached.

Egocentrism as a basis for theorizing in consumer research is evident, for instance, in symbolic interactionist discussions of fashion (Solomon, 1983), possessions and the extended self (Belk, 1988), gift giving and social exchange (Sherry, 1983), brand personality and values (Aaker, 1997), brand relationships (Fournier, 1998), game theory (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979), phenomenological accounts of consumption (Thompson et al., 1989), exchange theory and economic exchange (Bagozzi, 1975) and agency theory (Roberts 2003) to name just a few instances. The exception is Belk and Coon's (1993) study of agapic love, although a condition for such expressive behavior seems to be intimacy between the individuals concerned. While the philosopher Levinas sees good in commercial activities, he critiques the very idea of viewing the self as an enclosed and self interested agent (Desmond, 2007).

In this article, the authors seek an alternative to an egocentric theory in consumer behavior. They propose a contrasting consideration of the relations between self and other, using a Levinasian (1969) focus on the actual other with whom we interact. The domain of 'beauty' is rife with questions of morality, and provides a context within which to move from the 'idea of the other' (representational subjectivity) to a 'concrete relation with the other.' Any ethical system that understands the other as simply 'like the self' will be unable to respond to the uniqueness of another individual (Nealon, 1997). The authors believe that this particular take on the self and other will help fill the gap identified by Mittal (2006: 550): 'that the self itself is under-explicated in the consumer behavior literature' (see also Gabriel and Lang, 2008).

The beauty business is a large sector of the economy and drives the sales of beauty aids, fashions, body care items and cosmetics among American women and increasingly among men (Gross, 1995; Press, 2000). A lot of time, energy and money is spent to make ourselves beautiful. Beauty, which is often an ideal that is culture-specific, such as 'classic beauty' (perfect features), sex kitten (overt sexualized looks) and 'girl next door' (natural look) (Solomon et al., 1992). Even in Central European countries moving from socialism to a market orientation, women have begun to pay a lot of attention to their appearance and feel the pressure to look good (Coulter et al., 2003). Recently, the Dove Beauty Report (Etcoff et al., 2004) posited that this beautification begins at a very young age. It affects self-image and enforces compliance to the beauty ideal (Wissinger, 2009). Some feminists have criticized both the imposition of fashion and beauty treatment as guiding principles in social interaction and the fashion and beauty industry that creates and caters to these desires (Wolf, 1991).

The authors elaborate on Levinas's ethical subjectivity in the context of a discussion on cosmetics to highlight two important facets of beautification processes: the nourishment that such products/processes offer, and the complexities of creating selfhood when dealing with the human other on a face-to-face level.

## **Representational subjectivity: A critique of the literature on selfhood and identity**

### *Sociological and anthropological frameworks*

A central concern for both sociologists and anthropologists has been the relationship between self and other, whether one looks at classical discussions of traditional/post-traditional society, modernity or postmodern cultures (Baumann, 1991; Featherstone, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Miller, 1987; Warde 2005). In his discussion of the rise of consumer culture and modernity, Slater (1997) provides the contours of the emergence of the present context, while arguing that consumer culture and a new world of goods preceded the industrial revolution. In other words, consumer culture was central to the emergence of modernity with its particular take on self and society. Liberal frameworks, he suggests, focus on consumers as private individuals pursuing their identities through autonomous actions via the institution of the market, but always within a social context (1997: 42). A second set of frameworks (drawing on Weber, Simmel and Lukacs) examines capitalism as if it were separate from social life: 'which (capitalism) is objective, natural and independent of human action and which comes to regulate human life as an all-encompassing power (Slater, 1997: 117). Borrowing from Durkheim, Marx, Adorno and Horkheimer (all of whom deal with the issues of anomie, alienation) he argues that the focus of most of these writers is on the creation of a depthless, debased mass culture. Culture, in this context is produced to be sold (Slater, 1997: 70), a theme that is resonant with the works of ostensibly postmodern thinkers like Baudrillard and Jameson.

In the contemporary context and closer to the findings in this article, Slater (1997: 85) focuses on the works of Giddens, Baumann and Beck concerning the requirement of individuals to choose and produce the self via 'consumer goods and activities through which we construct appearances and organize leisure time and social encounters'. Although the individual has choices and expresses them in the creation of his/her identity, it is an activity fraught both with risk and anxiety. The emphasis is on anxiety that the consumer as bricoleur experiences. Consumer goods and the freedom experienced to construct identities using them is not so simple after all. Finally, Slater also considers the meaning and use of things (focusing on the works of Mauss, Douglas, Veblen and Bourdieu) taking the position that, while the meaning of things may be culturally defined (he calls it mapping the social and provides a critique of semiotics), it is through ordinary consumer practices that we make sense of the world around us. According to him, 'even the most trivial objects and trivial practices are the conduits through which one can see a wider sociality being mediated' (Slater and Miller, 2007: 8). Every day life is thus a sphere of practice, agency and also power (2007: 9)

Miller and Slater have a shared view when it comes to agency. Miller (Slater and Miller, 2007) notes that people everywhere are creating their own kind of cosmologies in practice at the level of the household or at the individual level, even very

mundane relationships to new technologies and so on. Slater echoes this view when he argues that a woman looking at a computer in a UNESCO project is theorizing the world in which her children must live and prosper. In that sense, he as the researcher is no different from the ones (women) who are being studied; each is trying to grapple with complex forces. As Miller (Slater and Miller 2007: 18) notes, in order to engage with these issues, you have to treat people equally as human beings.' Both theorists recognize the constraints posed by a focus on identity politics, wherein individuals who are studied are reduced to a particular discourse of identity, such as gender or age. Consequently, each agrees that the relationships to things are complex, in that they are also relationships to people.

Warde (2005) provides a slightly different take on the notion of the individual and selfhood, when he summarizes the work of Reckwitz (2002). According to Reckwitz (2002: 256):

The social world is first and foremost populated by diverse social practices which are carried by agents. As carriers of practices they [agents] are neither autonomous nor the judgmental dopes who conform to norms. They understand the world and themselves and use know-how and motivational knowledge according to the particular practice. There is a very precise place for the 'individual' – as distinguished from the agent . . . As there are diverse social practices and as every agent carries out a multitude of different social practices, the individual is the unique crossing point of practices, of bodily-mental routines.

Based on this description, Warde argues that the possible fragmentation of the self (espoused in postmodern accounts) is dependent on the number of networks an individual is involved in and in the heterogeneity of such social networks. However, the plurality of practices could contribute to the experience of fragmented personal lifestyles. It seems that the focus in practice theories is not so much on individual choices but more on the development of modes of appropriate conduct in everyday life. 'Persons confront moments of consumption neither as sovereign choosers nor as dupes' (Warde, 2005: 146). However, as Warde notes, theories of practice provide a powerful counterpoint to expressivist accounts of consumption. In his opinion, most action is not directed towards communicating with others but towards the fulfillment of self-regarding purposive projects.

In summary, the sociological and anthropological theories place emphasis on the complexities associated with an individual's relationships to things and his/her relationships to people. These theories provide an elaborate consideration of self and other (object or persons) that go beyond the culture studies focus on identity politics. As Miller notes, the conditions of modernity are always conditions of contradiction and such complexities must be factored into any account. Slater concurs: consumption is a 'muddy battlefield, the very material, practical ground of people's struggle for every day life under highly contradictory circumstances' (Slater and Miller, 2007: 19).

### *Consumer culture theory: Core self, extended self, de-centered self and empty self*

A different spin is evident in the consumer research literature on self and other. In consumer culture theory, the self is viewed as a tripartite system. 'I-for-myself' is how myself looks and feels to my own consciousness. 'I-for-others' is how myself appears to those outside it. Its converse, 'the other for me' is how outsiders appear to myself. A symbolic interactionist perspective guided early inquiry into the self (Belk, 1988) and fashion apparel in particular (Solomon, 1985). Within this approach, the other is viewed as the dialectic partner of the self. Anyone we interact with is a particular other, and socialization allows us to incorporate the cultural rules within our being (generalized other), internalized as the 'me'. When we interact with a specific other, we share his or her meaning systems. When we communicate with ourselves as 'me', we share the culture's meaning system. Culture becomes anthropomorphized as a person and enters into the dialogue with the self. This particular and generalized other are resources called upon to maintain selfhood. When the 'other' is viewed as being important to the definition of the self (Fournier, 1998; Thompson and Haytko 1997) or as detrimental to the definition of self (Hogg et al., 2008), it seems the self makes use of the other and finds itself only by means of the other.

Belk's (1988) seminal work emphasizes how individuals subjectively perceive who they are. Belk focuses on self-expression rather than self-transformation, a topic that Ahuvia (2005: 186) addresses. He classifies the formation of self and identity as an ongoing process fraught with conflict. Although loved objects might help resolve conflicts within one self or with other people, the focus is on the 'self' that appropriates certain objects in order to bolster its own identity and its relationship to others.

Identity formation is largely a malleable process and constructed through codes, practices and performances (Holt and Thompson, 2004). Arnould and Thompson (2005) argue that the marketplace is the pre-eminent source of mythic resources, often in relation to other identities engaged in a simultaneous process of identification and differentiation from selected others, which is sometimes fraught with ambivalence and even pathology (Hirschman, 1992). Brand relationships such as interdependence, love, and commitment, which posit the brand (the other) as partner suggest that, while it is possible to be equal, there is a reliance on the brand in expressing the self concept (Fournier, 1998).

Overall, consumers cope with these contradictions and difficulties. They attempt to bring together these disparate experiences through the lens of a coherent self (Holt and Thompson, 2004). Through narration, one recognizes one's relationship to persons, objects and events that are central to one's life (Escalas, 2007). On the other hand, while these ways of pursuing and presenting a coherent self might be personally edifying, often marketplace structures make it difficult for consumers to pursue such goals (Arvidsson, 2005; Holt, 2002). Kozinets (2002) questions how far such utopian ideals can be pursued and Belk et al. (2003) show how desiring



consumers are constituted by marketplace ideals often present in the discourse of global corporate capitalism; these studies draw attention to the concept of an empty or de-centered self and identity play (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995).

### *Emmanuel Levinas's affective and ethical subjectivity*

Levinas provides a completely different spin on the concept of the self and other. Levinas is primarily an existential phenomenologist. He deepens understanding of Merleau-Ponty's discussion of kinesthetic intentionality of the lived body that allows one to sense the world and to sense oneself as part of the world (Joy and Sherry, 2003; Thompson et al., 1989). For Merleau-Ponty, perception is based on embodiment, generally acquired skills and specific cultural skills. To this constellation, Levinas adds the concepts of enjoyment and pleasure. For him, there is an ethical orientation at the heart of subjectivity, such that enjoyment is the anchor and the pivot of ethical responsibility (Batnitzky, 2004). Here, the authors focus on two levels of Levinasian thought. The first involves the vital self, that unconscious non-reflective self that enjoys the world. The second includes the reflective self.

***Affective subjectivity.*** As lived, the body mediates the subject's experience of and interaction with the world as the subject comes to terms with it (Joy and Sherry, 2003). Vision is privileged in the process of developing a 'point of view' that represents the self as self-contained and otherness as the idea of the other. It is such 're-presentation' of self and other that seals the self off from earlier and more fundamental forms of being (Burns, 2008). Sensibility does not constitute representation, which is the province of reason, but it does constitute what Levinas calls 'the very contentment of existence' (1969: 135).

Levinas makes the affective and immediate enjoyment of the world the foundation of subjectivity. The pre-reflective self is nourished by everything in the world. Levinas gives an example:

Eating is to be sure not reducible to the chemistry of alimentation. But eating also does not reduce itself to the set of gustative, olfactory, kinesthetic and other sensations that would constitute the consciousness of eating. This sinking one's teeth into things, which the act of eating involves above all, measures... a surplus that is not quantitative, but is the way the 'I' the absolute commencement is suspended on the non-I. (1969: 128-9)

This foundation concretely individuates the subject and is pre-supposed by all other modes of subjectivity such as perception, cognition and ethical responsibility.

Things in the environment, however, are not merely tools and implements. Levinas insists that we live from these things. This 'living from' is a matter of taking what is other and making it a part of 'me'. The self senses itself as separate and independent in a non-cognitive way. Thus, in enjoyment, the self emerges already as the subject of its need. But this self, the self of enjoyment, constitutes



an egoism. It is happy but selfish. The self of enjoyment journeys into the world to make everything other part of itself, and it succeeds very well at this task (Burns, 2008).

**Ethical subjectivity.** But Levinas suggests that self indulgence can be mitigated by what is outside of it. The worst form of disturbance is coming face to face with another person. It is no longer the anonymous exteriority of the elemental, but the personal exteriority of the face of the Other that shakes us out of our complacency. The ethical moment is found for Levinas on the level of sensibility, when the egoist self comes across something that it wants to enjoy, something that it wants to make a part of itself, but cannot. That which the self wants to enjoy but cannot is the other person. This other person does not allow him-/herself to be consumed. The other resists consumption. When you imagine the other person to be like yourself you distort all knowledge of his/her uniqueness (Burns, 2008). In fact, Levinas suggests that the other is not opposed to the same, but overflows it. In the face of the other person, we see, according to Levinas, a quality that cannot be represented, although we could easily turn away from the person.

## Methodology

This study was inspired by the desire evident in many women and men to look beautiful and to own objects of beauty through which they fashion themselves. Beauty signifies differences in a number of registers: it makes distinctions between high and low, normal and abnormal, virtue and vice, and so on. What constitutes beauty is ever-changing and is often determined by some members of the community and not others. Judgments of beauty have strong moral overtones and lend themselves easily to the kind of theoretical considerations pursued in this study. The sample is skewed in favor of more women than men, and came about as a result of the principal author spending nine months undergoing various treatments at two major downtown spas and two naturopathic clinics in a North American city. Ethnographic fieldwork involved participant observation and in-depth interviews (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994). Our sample is composed primarily of affluent, middle- to upper-middle-class women who frequented spas. All of the participants were born and raised in the same country. Thus, while recognizing the importance of class and race in such an analysis, the authors' work will be limited by its focus on upper-class and upper-middle-class white women and some men. This is an important limitation, but because the focus is on luxury clothing and brands, it is appropriate. The principal author also made several visits to doctors' offices, beauty institutes and centers to discuss these issues with the 'creators' of beauty.

Instead of employing a formal structure, the interviews were guided both by the authors' responses to informants' reflections, and efforts to elicit more thorough descriptions of experiences. The goal was to allow informants to formulate and

articulate the network of meanings that constructed their understanding of beauty. The interviews were approximately two hours in duration and produced an extensive body of text that was analyzed in iterative, part-to-whole, fashion. Field notes were prepared and peer debriefing was conducted. Open coding methods allowed for identifying emergent themes.

Through discussions with our informants, the authors identified a major domain of beauty: beautification rituals. The interviews at the spa prompted visits to informants' homes. A number of long interviews interspersed with shorter interviews and prolonged participant observation occurred at the spas. A total of 30 women and seven men were interviewed. Of the seven men, one was a dermatologist and another was a cosmetic surgeon; each was interviewed in his office. Among the women, two were naturopaths and two were aestheticians. In eight instances, the authors went shopping with the women, although most interviews took place in two locales (spa and home). Three men were interviewed at the spa; the other two were acquaintances of the authors who were interviewed in their homes. With the permission of the informants, the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Table 1 provides a description of the informants in the study.

The general approach is phenomenological, combined with a post-structural analysis of the data (Thompson, 1997). The phenomenological view focuses on the lived experiences of individuals and how they understand and engage with the world, including themselves and others (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Thompson et al., 1989). In the process of analyzing data, the authors became aware that the structure of everydayness that constitutes being-in-the-world makes the assumption of totality: the self is a self-contained entity, and the other plays a minor role in its formation. They kept in mind the distinction between sensation, perception and enunciation. They also placed emphasis on the participants' concrete relations with others.

In a phenomenological study, sampling is purposive and prescribed from the start. Informants qualified for inclusion only if they had lived the experience under investigation. The main instrument of data collection was the interview. The authors have combined long interviews with extensive participant observation, giving the study an ethnographic dimension. Analysis involved iteration from part to whole, both within and across the interviews, and within and across field notes. Key themes were identified and explicitly positioned in relation to existing research, in order to reveal the common structures of the experiences, conflicts and paradoxes. Interpretations were continually revised in terms of new knowledge. As Thompson (1997) notes, the final explanation represents a fusion of horizons between the interpreter's frame of reference and the texts being interpreted. Phenomenology demands that intense reflection be part of the process, and, in this case, the primacy of the Levinasian experience of subjectivity was brought to the fore on a regular basis. Re-contextualization comes from writing and rewriting, which sensitizes the researcher and provides new insights. This also increases the level of abstraction, by moving from the 'particular sphere' to a 'universal

**Table 1.** List of participants.

Name	Age	Occupation
Lisa	30	Management consultant
Pat	30 something	Financial consultant
Joseph	40 something	Lawyer
Irene	30 something	Legal assistant
Sheila	30 something	Lawyer
Rita	35 something	Office assistant
Sonia	40 something	School teacher
Jess	50 something	Office worker
Jillian	30 something	Model
Stacey	40 something	Curator
Sarah	20 something	Student
Natalie	20 something	Student
Leslie	40 something	Media assistant
Rebecca	40 something	Media assistant
Rueben	40 something	Corporate lawyer
Penny	20 something	Graduate student
Margie	30 something	Naturopath
Deirdre	30 something	Home maker
Shelley	30 something	Naturopath
Risa	40	Teacher
Rina	40 something	Lawyer
Nancy	40 something	Professor
Elaine	50 something	Physiotherapist
Linda	60 something	Administrator
Risa	40 something	Teacher
Sophie	60 something	Homemaker
David	40	Entrepreneur (art gallery owner)
John	50	Teacher
Jim	30 something	Junior accountant
Cohort of practioners		
Juliana	30 something	Aesthetician (Guerlain)
Ron	40 something	Cosmetic Surgeon
Shelley	30 something	Naturopath
Randy	40 something	Dermatologist
Margie	30 something	Naturopath
Lillian	30 something	Aesthetician (Chanel)

sphere' where themes are readily comprehensible to the humans they seek to describe (Thompson, 1997).

In the discussions that follow, the authors outline through field note observations and interview verbatims how informants constructed themselves and others. It was through iterative working through the data that the authors realized what was there all along: the world the participants lived from and enjoyed is not the same as their perception of it. The combination of several methods of data collection analysis and interpretation allowed the authors to explore these issues more intensively. Several frames are included in the analysis, including an event frame (specific actors, events and settings) and an interpenetrated frame (use of quotes, field notes and interpretation). The authors used a novel frame (elaboration of existing theories) to provide a nuanced narrative of conceptual density (Spiggle, 1998: 167).

## **Creating the narrative: Representational, affective and ethical subjectivity**

### *Beautifying the face and body*

What women find attractive and unattractive about themselves and others is often determined by the social gaze – feminist call it the 'male gaze', a view contested by Scott (2005); Foucault (1977) – and is incorporated through a disciplinary gaze on a personal level (Bordo, 1993; Butler, 2003; Foucault, 1987). However, some women maintain that they choose to look beautiful without reference to male opinion. Neither position is satisfactory. How can women include the process of beautification as a source of pleasure when they know that the outcome of such beauty rituals is not always emancipating (Cahill, 2003)?

Levinas's concept of the Other (person) is one way of eliciting an answer to this question. For Levinas (1981[1974]), everyone is a subject and always subjected to the ethical demands of other subjectivities. A person's identity formation is based on responsibility and service to the Other. The needs of the Other calls the self out of itself, away from its pleasures and preoccupation with self possession (1981: 99). This paradox challenges the views espoused by both existentialism and phenomenology. In Levinas's view, we wallow in self-interest until another person interrupts our egocentric activities. But when the Other comes along, he/she has priority over self-interest; the Other always comes first. However, even in conceptualizing the Other, he advises against engaging in totalizing conceptualizations that reduce the Other to a commonality, an anonymous Other who is not worthy of attention. The face of the Other carries something beyond representation. Yet, because vision is still closely linked to representation, he suggests listening (the auditory sense) to the plight of the other. Facing an Other is primarily an ethical event, not an epistemological one, but there is potential for paralysis. How can one respond to the needs of the Other without making some form of decision and judgment?

Consider what informant Pat has to say. Here is her take on beautifying her body:

I don't like having to look beautiful because I am a woman. I tried it as a teenager and gave up. This is who I am. I use soap, a moisturizer and sun block. I go for a facial once in a while. The lines you see on my face are from all my experiences in the world. What you see is what you get... Why would I want to erase them?

Although she does not consider herself a feminist, she recognizes that becoming feminine is not what her life is about. At one time, like many teenagers, she tried to conform, but she gave it up. She learned from the stories that others, including her parents, had to tell, and was able to reject the social norm and assume responsibility for her appearance. She is pragmatic about skin care; it is to protect her from harsh weather, not to beautify. She also hints at the fact that her internalization of a fashion-beauty complex as a teenager was something she grappled with before she discarded it.

The association between the made-up look and femininity allows her to set herself apart as more 'natural,' and in a sense more liberated (similar to descriptions offered by Thompson and Haytko, 1997). This is the response of a person who seeks refuge in her egoism (Levinas, 1969: 172–3). However, even self-knowledge, self-possession and autonomy presuppose another (the person with a made-up look) who cannot be possessed. Beautifying practices in this context are not so easily reconciled with Pat's self. The ideal of physical perfection is what many women aspire to through ritual acts of beautification, although they know that what counts as physical beauty changes with time. It brings to mind a concern raised by Warde (2005) about consumption and theories of practice. According to him, consumption is not a unified and coherent activity and variation in behavior cannot be reduced to social stratification or a differential distribution of attitudes and motivations although they are relevant. Social differentiation is portrayed in new ways. It involves 'contrasting understandings, levels of practical competence and degrees of involvement that generate behavioral variation' (2005: 147).

When the interviewer pursued the issue of having a reasonably 'natural look' (soap, moisturizer and sun block), Pat noted that she is often reprimanded for not applying make-up, but because she wears beautiful sunglasses or designer shoes she still 'fits in.' At one and the same time that she is associated with individuality and independence (no make-up) she is also associated with the feminine passion for sunglasses and shoes. Pat's delight in luxury brands reflects brand passion or attachment (Fournier, 1998), whereas her desire to look natural is closer to the description offered by Coulter et al. (2003) as un-involvement or even ambivalence. Here, the complexity of the relationship to things is really about the complexity of relationships to people that both Miller (in Slater and Miller, 2007) detect. The contradictions and the conflicts in identity construction (the big stuff that Slater refers to) is worked on by Pat within the sphere of the intimate.

Unlike Pat, most of the other women interviewed were regulars at spas, beauty institutes, beauty salons, naturopathic clinics, and department store cosmetic counters. Some had experimented with treatments by cosmetic surgeons, such as micro-dermabrasion and botox, to smooth their wrinkles. Discussions with informants led the authors to interview a number of practitioners in the beauty world (naturopaths, dermatologists, cosmetic surgeons, and estheticians at beauty spas, beauty institutes and cosmetic counters). These discussions encouraged exploration of the connections between the body, health and beauty, while highlighting important ethical considerations.

### *Naturopaths*

First, the term 'beauty', with its moral overtones, is not used by naturopaths, dermatologists and cosmetic surgeons, and is not found in the rhetoric of famous health care and beauty gurus such as Dr Nicholas Perricone and Dr Andrew Weil. In general, medical discourse references are to health, wellness and aging. The one exception was the vision of the plastic surgeon and, to a lesser extent, the philosophy of Perricone (2006), author of a recent best seller, *Seven Secrets to Beauty, Health and Longevity*. The authors did hear the term 'beauty' at spas, hair salons, beauty institutes and cosmetic counters. It is worthy of note that the 'medical world' is often peopled by males while fashion counters, beauty institutes and hair salons have mostly females and some males. Many of our informants frequented spas, partly for the pleasure of being with other women (they come with friends or, if they are regulars, they become friendly with other frequent users) and engaging in similar rituals. The discussions with natural health practitioners revolved around the theme of 'wellness/beauty from the inside out'. Employees at spas and beauty institutes also used the phrase 'beauty from the inside out', although they generally used products on exterior surfaces.

At the level of cultural discourses, whether individual or institutional, it is clear that in the first decade of the 21st century, beauty as a concept is described primarily in the context of health, aging and wellness (see Thompson and Troester, 2002). There is also a growing acceptance of multiple models of beauty that reflects the multicultural and multiracial nature of North America (Englis et al., 1994).

The discourses of naturopaths typically oppose the western medical system and embrace other systems, such as traditional Chinese medicine or the Indian Ayurvedic system. Their focus is on the corporal and mental health of their clients. However, they carry out several tests to determine the internal health of their patients. Margie, a naturopath, commented:

We would never use the term beauty. . . But the outcomes of this inside-out philosophy will result in greater beauty. Whether it is through appropriate supplements or hydrotherapy, these actions provide energy (cleansing and nourishing) for the body, and greater energy means higher metabolic levels and actions in all of the cells. The body will now operate at an optimum level.

Naturopaths do not have the level of official recognition or the advanced education of medical doctors, although their talk has elements of medical discourse. They also recognize that individuals have an inner and outer sense of beauty, and so must work towards enhancing their own potential. But in the face of the Other (their clients), some naturopaths try to be open, non-judgmental and supportive. When probed further, Margie opined:

Beauty is difficult to describe and it is a passing phenomenon. Physical perfection is not distributed evenly. But everyone can cultivate their own beauty – which means being good on the inside and enhancing their appearance on the outside. Also, what I consider beautiful may not be shared by another person. There are many models of beauty. You have to constantly act on your self – eat right, exercise, use supplements and use natural therapies – in order to bring out the best and most beautiful in you. You can never stop at working on becoming beautiful inside and outside... it is a lifelong process.

Margie's comment about the many models of beauty is refreshing, and enabling moments can be recognized as well. She refers to a process of continuously working on the self – keeping our selves open to ever more development without succumbing to negative disciplinary practices. Warde (2005: 148) identifies both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, associated with practices and here the reference is to intrinsic rewards that are based on the goals and aspirations of the practice itself. It is also an activity where individuals receive the help they need through supportive practitioners. Individuals generally acquire a sense of mastery, expertise and self-development through natural health practices such as exercise, appropriate eating habits and the use of natural remedies. Foucault (1988: 19) refers to these operations on the body as 'technologies of the self.' Discipline may be at the heart of what Margie says, but these self-help actions provide individuals with the wherewithal to take care of themselves.

Risa (a 40-something school teacher) describes her visits to the naturopath as essentially a health and beauty regime that includes massage and herbal remedies, as well as hydrotherapy. She notes:

I like this particular naturopathic clinic because it combines all of this under one roof. I first see the naturopath to discuss any particular symptoms and the remedies. I am getting older and my skin no longer is supple. I realize that eating organic foods, acupuncture and the deep cleansing of tissues through proper ingestion of herbs as well as through hydrotherapy is very helpful.

Risa's comments also reflect a deeper understanding of health and aging, and of the ways in which the body responds. Cleansing and purification are essential steps in this process. Healing cannot be accomplished overnight, because the accumulation of toxins in the cells has presumably occurred over a long period of time. Naturopaths maintain that it is possible to look young, feel well and be



agile through lifestyle changes and ingestion of appropriate herbs, as well as spiritual practices such as yoga, together with exercise and organic foods. Risa's preference for a naturopathic clinic is based on the notion of care that is offered, one that entails the need to enter into a relation and meet the Other.

### *Dermatologists and botox*

Many dermatologists also equate skin care, and especially face/body care, with health care. Again, they do not describe themselves as being in the beauty business, although they may sell their often-unbranded beauty products and recipes. These practitioners can be classified into two categories: those who combine more holistic practices along with general dermatological practices, and those who are less inclined to do so. For the former, the quest for physical beauty is seen as a frivolous pursuit when compared to activities such as leading a healthy and vibrant life.

The second group, on the other hand, emphasizes the latest technological breakthroughs and practices designed to improve skin and body care. The discourses of both groups suggest that their commitment is to help patients maintain a healthy body by controlling what is ingested. One very successful dermatologist, Randy, maintained:

We do all the initial work-up to check if the patient is in good health before we do anything. I advise them on their diet and exercise. I tell them that if they want to look young and live long, they have to eat better – more fruit and vegetables, less meat and more complex carbohydrates. Their intake of nutrients and expulsion of waste is crucial to keep the body free of toxins. So their treatment starts from the inside out. A 50-year-old lady came to me saying that she wanted to look younger and prettier. After examining her I told her that she would achieve her goal by adding botox to her regime. This is, of course, after she has done everything to change her life. The skin is the barometer of the health of the body.

Randy's pronouncement that the woman was ready for botox was based on his assessment of her lifestyle as evidenced by her skin. The woman had, through her own actions, nourished the inside and thus earned his approval to have botox injected in the surface where the wrinkles begin to show. Although within North American culture it is understandable that this 50-year-old wanted to look younger and prettier, her take-charge attitude toward her own health suggests that she is not entirely dependent on the negative gaze of Others. Botox would only fix the exterior temporarily, whereas if there is continuous effort to cleanse and nourish the inner body the problematic exterior will also change. In general, medical doctors can alter the texture of the skin, wrinkles, dark circles under the eyes, dark spots on parts of the body, and other general skin problems.

Rina, a 40-something lawyer who regularly goes to a dermatologist to have botox injections, explained her rationale:

It makes sense to have a refreshed look. I know I am not going to look stunningly beautiful, but when I look relaxed (botox does that by preventing contraction of muscles) people do notice me. I just don't like being passed over.

When asked to whom she was referring, she observed it was her employers (mostly men). She noted:

A man with wrinkles and grey hair is considered distinctive, but a woman with wrinkles and grey hair is seen as losing her beauty and her competence. I want to be seen as vital, dynamic and competent.

The fear of being passed over as a result of getting older is a fear that many women, and some men, share because of society's veneration of youth and its association with power (Bordo, 2000; Wolf, 1991). Rina's desire not to be passed over reflects a concern about beauty norms promoted primarily through the media. In this instance, the Other's (employer's) gaze is clearly a concern for Rina. In particular, it is the skin's surface that is viewed, and upon which judgments are made about her person. Joseph (lawyer) had botox injections for fear of being passed over for promotion. In his case, it is also the employer's gaze that is critical. As Bordo (2000) argues, we can all try to become what our culture regards as sexually alluring, if we obsessively work at it. Males are not excluded from this process of objectification (Holt and Thompson, 2004). It is equally important to consider what level of commitment is displayed by various individuals to different practices. Levinas (1969) suggests that totalizing another with categories and labels is convenient and efficient, but narrows understanding.

### *Face and body: Perricone and Weil*

Others, unlike Rina and Joseph, use face and body products (rather than botox) that are advertised as anti-aging. Some swear by Dr Perricone's products and others by Dr Weil's. Both doctors are high-profile physicians. Perricone is known for his anti-inflammatory regimen that he claims can turn back the clock (he has a line of cosmeceuticals and nutraceuticals), Weil for his integrative approach to health that celebrates beauty at all stages in a person's life.

Three informants (Nancy, a 40-something professor; Elaine, a 50-year-old physiotherapist; and Linda, a 60-year-old administrator) use various types of skin care products such as those promoted by Perricone and Weil, but they apparently contest the beautification practices that many women consider necessary before they appear in public. In Dr Perricone's philosophy, not only does beauty come from

the inside out, but also by turning back the clock. Nancy, who swears by Dr Perricone's approach, observed:

I have now used his products for about three years and I am so happy about what I can now see. Everyone tells me that I look very relaxed and my complexion dewy. The change in diet (heavy emphasis on fish) that he recommends along with the capsules that he prescribes does wonders for me. I will never go back to the normal cosmetics sold over the counter in any store. I feel young and look beautiful.

Nancy's remarks suggest that anti-aging is a process of working at the interfaces of the inner and outer, chiefly through dietary changes, taking supplements, and applying topical lotions. She notes that you can slow down the process of aging or even reverse it, which calls into question the taken-for-granted processes of the body. But she is squarely situated within the Dr Perricone discourse and is happy that everyone thinks she looks relaxed and has a wonderful complexion.

Dr Weil (2005) goes one step further in his practice of integrative medicine. 'Beauty from the inside out' means to him a radical change in one's lifestyle. He is not concerned with turning back the clock, and people who consult him do not necessarily want to do so. They want to age well, as Elaine noted.

Weil recommends alternative medicinal practices such as acupuncture, yoga and other meditative practices, along with supplements and lotions. Whenever possible, he suggests using organically grown vegetables and fruit. Integrative medicine by definition involves the body, mind and spirit, and all aspects of one's lifestyle. It makes use of appropriate therapies that are both conventional and alternative, and espouses a partnership between patient and practitioner in the healing process. His philosophy is acknowledged in medical schools where training includes examination of the processes of self-exploration and self-development. There is more openness to the Other in Weil's work, and through this attentiveness, he is able to respond to the needs of the Other.

Linda, who follows Weil's advice and uses his supplements and topical skin care products, says:

I don't believe you can turn back the clock. But you can look beautiful at any age. Accepting oneself for who you are at each stage in your life and taking care of your inner/spiritual life along with healthy living is a way to achieve this balance [this includes taking into consideration your relationship with others]. I am doing yoga and regular exercises. I only eat organic food, which means I rarely go out to eat. I have so much more energy and confidence now than ever before . . . I am so active . . . I am doing things that might stump someone else my age.

Linda's changes are more dramatic because she has acted on several layers between her inner and outer body. The spiritual dimension, enhanced through meditation, and which takes into consideration the 'Others' in her life, is an additional layer that has a direct impact on her body.

### *Spa luxury treatments*

It is clear that, with the advice of experts, these women have engaged in acts of beautification. They have micro-managed the care of their faces and bodies to prevent inflammation and wrinkling. All three meet at the health spa for treatments (massage, facial, manicure), and all seem to take great pleasure in seeing each other and enjoying these treatments together. On one occasion, when all three were interviewed together, they observed:

Nancy [who had just had a facial and was sipping herbal tea]: I feel like I am in heaven. I have forgotten about my family, my job and that I have to run a whole lot of errands. This is my time . . . and I am enjoying it with my friends.

Elaine [laughing]: Yeah . . . this is our time . . . We need to take care of ourselves as well. Every month, I set time out for myself . . . I can then go back and face the world.

Linda [who had a massage]: I love the fact that organic essential oils are gently folded over my skin and then massaged into my body. I drifted off to sleep because of the colored lights [color therapy] and the soothing hands of the therapist. An hour and a half later, I was gently woken up and when I looked at myself, I loved my beautiful self. . . then we just sit around chatting and sipping various teas . . . totally energized.

This conversation suggests that they were in the process of self-renewal, finding great pleasure in it and being in each other's company. It was a group act of therapy. Self-initiated and self-directed freedom is not negative; it is the source of our identity as Levinas would argue. 'We live from good soup, good music and good conversation' (1969: 112). The process is significant to these women and gives them the energy to go out and face the world. As Scott (2005: 215) observes, contrary to what second wave feminists say, make-up and other grooming practices are not "lies" that cover up the "true self". The self is created through a trial and adjustment process in which some goals are expressed, some rejected and some refined.' Grooming is a sensuous activity (2005: 215).

The three women also seem to draw a distinction between the site of beautification treatments and the site of the presentation of the beautified body. It is this kind of distinction that permits a nuanced understanding of the pleasures inherent in beautification. The process of female beautification is not always linked to conformity or becoming a victim to the male gaze. On the other hand, as Levinas would argue, these beauty rituals nourish them and draw them into a process of self-recovery and development. This is bonding time for these women – both between themselves and their therapists, as well as among themselves.

Recently, men have increased their attendance at spas and indulge in massages, pedicures and manicures. Although some of them are diffident about describing their spa experiences others see it as part of their grooming regime. As David, a 40-something art gallery owner noted:

In my line of business grooming seems to be essential to be credible. I go to the spa to get a manicure and pedicure from time to time.

When probed further he continued:

It sort of goes with being around art. Artists can afford to look unkempt – in fact it is sort of expected of them, But I have to get people to appreciate the artists I represent and talk to companies and government about the art in order to interest them.

Although David emphasizes the functional outcomes of grooming, he admitted that he enjoys being taken care of. John (50-something), a teacher, also said he goes often to get massages and facials. He noted:

At first, I was under the impression that men don't really go to spas. But then I realized, I was not the only one. Having experienced both facials and massages, I can tell you that it is very relaxing and makes me look really good. I love having them.

John was recently divorced, and in order to get back to the dating scene, he has had to take stock of himself. He has had to lose weight, pump weights, and get facials and massages to get noticed. It is an expensive proposition for him, coming from a middle class background, but he sees the benefits of it. He also loves the pampering he receives.

All of these examples resonate with the observations made by Miller (2007: 19) 'that people have a more complex sense of who they are and of their relationships to other people and to things. They don't want to see themselves as undiluted tokens of some discourse of identity . . . they actually want to have more nuance.'

### *Plastic surgeons*

The plastic surgeon (Ron) who was interviewed for this study had a slightly different take on beauty. His brochure used the term beauty – as in 'beauty is but skin deep' – proclaiming that his aim was to enhance the appearance of the men and women who consulted him. While he still has to monitor their general health, he is a medical practitioner working from the outside in. The term 'cosmetic surgery' captures this ideology, but he cannot solve or repair people's inner problems. There is no guarantee that repairing the outside will heal the inside. His practice involves both invasive and non-invasive procedures. He noted:

Most of my clients are women and they do not want to look old. If they come for a facelift, I no longer do the 'stretched look'. Clever ways of lifting and tweaking the skin and muscles make it possible to give them the 'refreshed look'. I even use fat from other parts of their body to inject into areas that require plumping. This gives a more youthful look.

His account suggests that while he can attend to their outer appearance, the patients themselves have to work on their inner selves in order to maintain

the external surface. He also actively promotes the philosophy of looking good (age appropriate) at each stage in life. But the fact that many of his clients are women who want to look younger suggests that they may be acting in reaction to societal norms of appearance.

### *Cosmetics counters*

Most cosmetic company aestheticians also work from the outside in, although one particular example suggests that they are in various ways also proclaiming a philosophy of 'beauty from the inside out'. Juliana, an aesthetician at Guerlain, was adamant that the company espoused a beauty-from-the-inside-out approach to life. Field notes of one of the authors support this:

Juliana was finishing with a client when I arrived. She apologized that she had taken a little longer than she had expected since she was teaching a client who had gone through chemotherapy how to apply make-up. She also said that she knew this woman had cancer even before she had disclosed this to her. When I asked her how she made that judgment she responded: 'The skin looks very different – it is dry and lifeless – mostly because of chemotherapy.' Since Julianna's job is to assess the quality of facial skin, she could immediately tell the difference. She sees herself as an artist – 'the skin becomes the canvas' she said. When I asked Juliana what Guerlain's philosophy was, she said there were two themes – 'beauty is always from the inside out' and 'cosmetics only help to enhance a woman's looks'.

It is impressive how effectively she demonstrated her knowledge of the company philosophy. She pointedly said: 'Even if you had the best make-up but you said things that were ugly, you could never be beautiful.' Although she saw the links between ethical behavior and personal beauty, she could not explain how negative emotions had physiological effects on the body, as Linda had outlined earlier. Although she is no expert on medical discourse, she makes an important point – one that second wave feminists would condemn as folk knowledge. For her, identity is created in the interplay between self and Other – when one engages another person as an individual, one recognizes the humanity of the Other.

Juliana's descriptions suggest that medical knowledge of the body is used when caring for a client. There is a strong awareness of the presence of the Other, one that is not created through representation. Here the Levinasian phrase 'face to face' takes on new meaning – one that is respectful of the Other's needs and offers appropriate interventions. Although skin and body care is an ongoing process (meaning that 'the body must be constantly made and remade'), it is brought into harmony each time through the treatments. The treatments provided a certain, albeit temporary, stability and solidity to the body. This state of being does not last; it has to be recreated over and over again. The concept of (in-) stability and (temporary) boundary creation was even more apparent in her make-up lesson for Risa and one of the authors. Field notes suggest that Juliana is not only

a competent teacher but also a caring person: 'After the first half hour of acting as the expert, she just joined in the fun. She showed us a few tricks, and as Risa and I experimented with the products, she allowed us to re-do what she had taught us.'

There was scientific precision in terms of the lines she drew and the blending before the final product was ready. At one level, Juliana was the perfect Guerlain representative; on another level, she was a caring individual who conversed with the authors and taught them how to enhance their looks. However, all her actions, multi-layered as they were, underscored the unfinished nature of the exterior that had to be continually enhanced in order to create beauty. The beautiful look is only temporary. It can be replaced by another. Internal emotions determine the limits to permanency in the creation of this look. 'If one is angry,' says Juliana, 'it shows immediately and no amount of make-up can help to camouflage the interior.' So, the face has to be prepared again, just as the canvas has to be prepared before the painting begins.

In Juliana's response, one sees the caring and responsible person that Levinas is talking about. She epitomizes the face-to-face interactions. From a pragmatic perspective, all the knowledge she has and the convictions she holds reveal themselves in their application to her clients – especially clients who are just recovering from cancer. She listened attentively and carefully to them and generously offered her sense of care. She exemplifies in her behavior what Levinas declaims: she hears their plea (it may be visible in their eyes) and wants to make them look beautiful.

Juliana may not be a philosopher, but her wise words draw attention to the fact that complexity and morality abound in discussions of beauty. Glamour associated with a made-up face is just that – the cool untouchable exterior, the mask of perfection. At another level, women speak of self-fashioning their lives. As Higgins (2000: 106) notes:

joy, presumably would be a psychological state conducive to a sense of well-being and to beauty . . . the conditions that enable non-defensive encounters are probably part of the story too.

When asked whether she felt coerced into learning how to look beautiful, Risa said:

The entire process was more fun at Guerlain . . . it included you. It was the interactions between the three of us that made it memorable. I am not going to have the 'Guerlain look' or the 'Chanel look' on a daily basis . . . I am just going to incorporate some of the little secrets to enhance how I look. It is nice when people think you are hot.

When asked to expand (in a follow-up interview) upon who the 'people' to whom she was referring actually were, she said that they included her close friends, neighbors and even acquaintances (both males and females).

Risa's response suggests a level of agency in designing how she looks on a daily basis. She certainly was not going to be coerced into spending two or three hours



a day to beautify herself. She did not feel inadequate in terms of her looks, and she had come to learn how to do her face because it would help her to enhance her appearance. However, the ideal of beauty as reflected in her words 'looking hot', suggests a tension between what is coerced and what is freely chosen. Learning to look good was a pleasurable social activity, but wanting to look a particular way in order to be attractive to her friends and neighbors suggests a concern about social acceptance.

As Cahill (2003: 51) witnessed in many beauty salons: 'Beautification is a decidedly inter-subjective process.' It is a process by which one individual allows another to work on her body, although the agency of the client persists and is even enhanced. Recall the paradigmatic model of inter-subjectivity: the bodies, actions and possibilities of the three friends (Linda, Nancy and Elaine) were deeply intertwined with each other. Applying Levinas's ideas and moving beyond pure phenomenology, there is apparently revealed a radical open submission in the face of the Other, whether it is between the aesthetician and client (Juliana) or between friends (Linda, Nancy and Elaine). An active, caring responsiveness defines both types of experiences. Without the personal revelations, in the open and willing encounter with the Other, one cannot proceed without violating the Other. Participation could quickly become control if one did not first and continuously open oneself to instruction from the Other. This openness ought not to be tainted by the imposition of rationality's urgent desire to conceptualize.

### *Cosmetics and cancer survivors*

It appears that no matter how enjoyable the process of beautification is, there is little or no control over how the images of any of these informants are organized and consumed socially. Sonia, who had just recovered from breast cancer, described the complexities of looking beautiful:

I have two small children and so I was scared. After the radiation and chemo my hair fell out. My son freaked out . . . He thought I was going to die. That was very hard. My daughter was upset as well, but not afraid of looking at me. My parents on the other hand told me that I looked very beautiful . . . I decided then that I was not going to wear a wig. My friends would know that I had cancer. Because I did not have a mastectomy I did not have to worry about breast implants. I now think I have the best body I ever had. I love my body when I see myself in the mirror, despite the pounds. My breasts look great despite the chemotherapy. The doctors focus on your 'breasts' and tell you how to take care of them. It is your total well-being and not just your 'breast health' that they should advise you about . . . They say that breast cancer is an emotional disease . . . I knew right away that my life had to change. My husband and I remain good friends even though we are divorced. I had to work on all aspects of my life, and now I think I am in touch with my spiritual side . . . this is not what doctors are concerned about.

Sonia's description of her cancer focuses on aspects of her appearance that people used in order to judge where she was in the recovery process (Pavia and Mason, 2004). Hers is a forceful presence that cannot be ignored. Rationalization would be one way of not having to deal with a person who is as vulnerable as Sonia. Acknowledging her beauty (her parents) was a response to the instruction from the Other – a submission of the self to attentiveness. Sonia's decision not to wear a wig was an important step in self-confidence. She refused to hide her illness from her friends.

Exposing the different stages of her cancer recovery process to the outside world (her decision not to wear a wig) gave Sonia courage and led her to make other, far-reaching decisions, such as divorcing her husband. Being a wife had been a constant site of struggle, and this revelation came only when she was diagnosed with cancer. Her emphasis on the love she has for her body despite her weight gain and how good her breasts look today suggests a reconstruction of her own beauty. For her, in this new state, a certain level of vanity is acceptable. As Frost (1999: 131) argues: 'women not only take pleasure in looking at other women but use these images to take pleasure in engaging with their own appearances.' This seems to apply to Sonia. Beauty had come from the inside out in the way of a new-found regard for life, her overall health and her spiritual growth. A greater beauty had emerged from a greater awareness of what life means (Pavia and Mason, 2004).

### *Interpretive summary*

For many of the women informants who were learning to have fun with make-up, part of the pleasure of beautification had to do with mastery of the techniques and materials. To do this is not necessarily to succumb totally to the male gaze. It is to constitute oneself as capable of creating a variety of images – to understand oneself as an artist. Insofar as they wanted to learn how to do this, they exerted their own agency. But, insofar as they have little control over how their image is organized and consumed in the external world, they were under the surveillance of the social gaze. To reduce such complexity to a discussion of identity politics alone based on gender disregards the control wielded by these women to make sense of their complex lives, to focus only on how to perform a consistent persona and to lose track of the broader materiality of objects (Slater and Miller, 2007: 19).

In talking with Sonia, it was clear that her new-found appreciation of beauty and her body came about because of her illness. The possibility of her own death made her realize that her body was not a given (as witnessed in the emphasis on body parts by her physician) but was continually being remade. The beautified face/body celebrates an attainment of integrity, but also re-activates a state of disintegration. The body may best be viewed as a body in process – a configuring subjectivity that is affective, ethical and representational.

To understand beautifying as enabling is to understand that one has reason to embrace the increase in capacities it permits without acceding to the intensification

of the disciplinary power it currently requires. Becoming aware of exactly how and what one does and realizing that changing old patterns can have embodied effects are enabling acts of self-transformation. But there is an emotional angle to this as well. Illouz (2009) locates it (emotion) within a deeper understanding of the inter-relations between cognition, the body and affect. She maintains that, 'while emotion is not action per se, it is what orients and implicates the self in its social environment. It creates the mood for an act and provides the inner energy that propels us toward the act' (2009: 382). Such complexity of action and interaction with the Other needs to be better understood.

Levinas (1998) talks about the transformation of the self, but such a transformation is possible only in inter-subjective contexts where the singularity of the Other forces itself upon the self. He argues that facing another is not an event of knowing. It is primarily an ethical event. It is also here that Levinas's concept of 'learning from' is useful. From the stories Others have to tell, we can learn to respond with humility and assume responsibility.

### **Concluding remarks and implications**

In consumer research, an egocentric approach dominates explanations of the relationship between self and other. People see the world through their own eyes, experience it through their senses (either negatively or positively or as threatening or supporting) and interpret their perceptions egocentrically. Moral judgments are likewise based on these unconscious evaluative responses (Bordo, 1993; Entwistle, 2002). The major question explored in this article is simply: Is there an alternative to egocentric thinking in our theorizing about consumer behavior? The study shows that the possibilities are real.

Even though scholars using a dialogical perspective have approached the 'Other' (person) as a partner essential to keeping the self open (e.g. Murray, 2002; Thompson and Haytko, 1997), they do not provide answers to how the oppressive potential of the symbolic can give rise to a new way of thinking about inter-subjectivity and ethics. The dialogical way of understanding the world is concerned with Otherness only insofar as it is related to the primary actor, 'The self encounters the Other as a way of enhancing its own multiplicity' (Nealon, 1997: 138). Dialogical understanding, however generous, remains regulated by a thoroughgoing privilege of the self.

A twist to the relations of self and other is provided by Belk et al. (2003: 331), who argue that desire is deeply rooted in the social world and consists of 'bodily passions and mental reflections'. Their suggestion that desire is embodied passion that can warm or burn the body because of its intensity has parallels in Levinas's notion of embodiment. In their discussions of sociality, mimesis and the desire for social relations Belk et al. consider concrete others. As they note, 'what makes consumer desire attach to a particular object is not so much the object's particular characteristics as the consumer's own hopes for an altered state of being, involving an altered set of social relationships' (2003: 348). Overall, they do offer a socially

grounded and compelling notion of ethics that does not resort to abstract ways of thinking.

There is no doubt that it requires a major effort to break out of the automatic way of thinking that we are accustomed to, and to come to terms with the uniqueness of another person. Informants' responses and authors' observations prompted rethinking of the relationship between the self and other. When participants have expressed nurturing relations to Others, conventional analysts have subsumed it under the concept of reciprocity and economic exchange. Both are egocentric views that privilege enlightened self interest. Re-working the data has allowed the authors to see that many of their informants respected the uniqueness of the other person and did not see them like 'themselves' ('the same').

The authors have shown through discussion of appearance-making the importance of ethical subjectivity to improving and extending understanding of ethical inter-subjectivity and identity formation. In representational subjectivity, the elements of the world that appear strange to us become a part of us through appropriation. We forget, however, that our perception of the world is not what it is, because we ignore our sensuous experiences with the material world that precedes representation.

The authors also showed that the preoccupation with the self has to be tempered by the ethics of responsibility to the Other: ethical subjectivity. As demonstrated earlier, Juliana's actions to beautify women recovering from cancer are not only mediated by language, but also by caring actions. Her quick stroking and layering are only explained after the fact. Also, her openness to Risa is profound, and also responds with care. Risa is not totally passive. Although the pleasures of beautification are related and connected with the mastery of skills and materials, this does not entail for Risa total commitment to contemporary meanings of feminine beauty. It is a way of learning to become, in some sense, an artist.

Beautification and fashion practices have a long history. As Scott (2005) notes, body rituals and grooming (including painting, tattooing, piercing and reshaping) are part of every culture. Most cultures believe that sensual experiences evoked thorough certain colors, scents, textures and sounds have the power to uplift and renew the spirit as well as inspire the imagination. This is what Levinas would call affective subjectivity. But this is ultimately secondary to the encounter with the Other, the other human that we come into contact with, as exemplified in the actions of Julianna toward her clients, which Levinas would call ethical subjectivity.

Finally, although the data is drawn from spa and beauty contexts, the findings have general relevance for theorizing in consumer research. This study offers an alternative to egocentric thinking in consumer behavior. To give an example, the literature relies heavily on the concept of reciprocity (as in enlightened self-interest) to talk about gift giving. If we use a Levinasian approach, the Other can never be made 'the Same'. The Other not only resists but overflows it. This asymmetrical relation points to a realm beyond reciprocity (Roberts, 2003: 252). Agapic love, as discussed by Belk and Coon (1993), between romantic partners comes closest to

this idea, although the authors suggest that this would apply to brotherly love, parental love, and so on. However, even in these instances, the source of sacrifice (based on agape) assumes intimate knowledge between individuals concerned. Levinas on the other hand, exhorts us to be responsible to the unknown face of a stranger that calls out to us.

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