Poorer people are more likely to eat 'unhealthy' foods, to smoke cigarettes and to be employed in repetitive, physically difficult work or the opposite: boring, inactive employment. Moreover, their housing conditions and neighbourhoods tend to be worse. All of these factors impact upon the condition of a person's health: the physical shapes of bodies are strongly influenced by social factors.

These social factors are also closely linked to emotional wellbeing. People with low or no incomes are more likely to have mental health problems. It is not clear, however, whether poverty causes mental illness, or whether it is the other way around. For example, certain people with mental health issues may be at risk of becoming homeless, just as a person who is homeless may have an increased risk of illnesses such as depression.

There are other types of social factors too. Bodies are young or old, short or tall, big or small, weak or strong. Whether these judgments matter and whether they are positive or negative depends on the cultural and historical context. The culture – and media – of different societies promote very different valuations of body shapes. What is considered as attractive or ugly, normal or abnormal varies enormously. Currently, for example, in rich societies the idea of slimness is highly valued, but historically this was different. In most societies the ideal body shape for a woman was a 'full figure' with a noticeable belly, while in middle-aged men, a large stomach indicated that they were financially successful in life. In many traditional African and Pacific island cultures, for example, a large body shape was a sign of success and a shape to be aimed at.

It is easy for people to feel undervalued because of factors they have no power to change, for example, their age and height. Equally, they can feel pressured into making changes to their appearance when there is a choice, which in extreme cases can lead to obsessions with weight loss and fitness regimes.

Sociologists, then, are suggesting that we should not just view bodies and minds in biological terms, but also in social terms. The physical body and what we seek to do with it change over time and society. This has important implications for medicine and ideas of health. Thus, the idea of people being 'obese' is physically related to large amounts of processed food, together with lack of exercise, and is therefore a medical issue. However, it has also become a mental health issue and social problem as a result of people coming to define this particular body shape as 'wrong' and unhealthy.

Progress check

How many boxes can you tick? You should work towards being able to tick them all.

Did you …

- remember that the questions are in the same order as the information in the text? ☐
- read the questions slowly before reading the text? ☐
- use the key words technique? ☐
- read the instructions carefully to know what the word limit was? ☐
- count the words in your answers? ☐
- check if you needed to use words from the text or not? ☐

LIVEWORKSHEETS