



# body work

Forty years ago, baby boomers vowed not to trust anyone over 30. Today, they don't want to look older than 30. The same youth culture that once inspired a generation to tune in and drop out is now compelling them to nip, tuck, lift, and separate. An estimated 11.5 million cosmetic procedures were done in the United States in 2005, a fourfold increase since 1997. Cosmetic surgeries account for about 20 percent of all procedures, while the remaining 80 percent are "non-surgical" touch-ups such as Botox injections and microdermabrasion. All told, Americans spent more than \$12 billion on cosmetic procedures in 2005.

How exactly are Americans reconstructing themselves? The top five cosmetic surgeries in 2005 were liposuction, breast augmentation, eyelid surgery, nose reshaping, and tummy tucks, according to data from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS). The explosion in cosmetic procedures over the past 14 years may be even more dramatic than the ASPS data suggest, however. The society documents only procedures done by its members. The actual number may be anywhere from two to five times higher, as more and more procedures are done by physicians from other specialties. Using this more expansive count, there were an estimated 3.3 million Botox shots, 455,000 liposuctions, 170,000 tummy tucks, and 200,000 nose jobs in 2005.

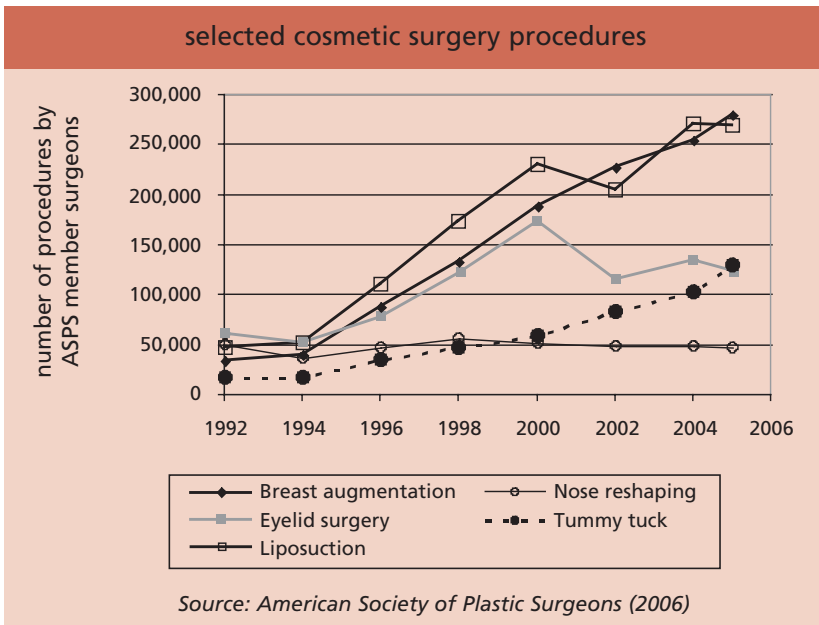
Media images of "metrosexual" men notwithstanding, cosmetic surgery is women's territory. Although the raw num-

ber of procedures done to men has also skyrocketed over the past decade, women have consistently accounted for 85 to 90 percent of patients. And while middle-class white women are still the most likely to go under the knife, growing numbers of black, Asian, and Hispanic women are reshaping their faces and bodies into what many would deem a "white" ideal: a proportional hourglass figure, button nose, and round eyes. Black women are having their noses narrowed and their breasts reduced, while Asian women are redoing their eyelids and increasing their bust lines.

Experts point to three forces driving the makeover mania. First, an unprecedented 60 percent of Americans are now overweight or obese. The quick fix of a tummy tuck or liposuction may be preferable to a lifetime of dieting and Pilates. Second, baby boomers—the 75 million babies born between 1946 and 1964—are now middle-aged. Aging is inevitably accompanied by slower metabolism and loss of skin elasticity. Even those older women who proudly embrace their crow's feet and forehead creases as badges of experience and wisdom cannot escape daily media images glorifying youthful beauty. A competitive (and arguably ageist) workplace and perhaps a more cutthroat dating market for older women may make cosmetic surgery seem like a necessary evil to those vying for a promotion or a date.

Finally, "having work done" has been normalized in recent years. TV shows like *Nip/Tuck* and *Extreme Makeover* carry the message that everyone is doing it. With Restylane injections and chemical peels now available at the neighborhood day spa, cosmetic procedures no longer seem so invasive or extreme. Some observers liken nonsurgical procedures to a "gateway" drug. Nervous customers dip their feet into the pool with a quick Botox shot in the forehead or a collagen injection in their lips. After this first foray, they may progress to the "harder" stuff, like a full-blown facelift or liposuction.

Advocates say that a lift here or stitch there makes men and women feel better about themselves. Yet critics point out that anywhere from 25 to 50 percent of patients become repeat customers, and that many will never be satisfied in their elusive quest for eternal youth and beauty.



*Contexts*, Vol. 6, Number 1, pps. 58. ISSN 1536-5042, electronic ISSN 1537-6052. © 2007 by the American Sociological Association. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: [ctx.2007.6.1](https://doi.org/10.1215/15365042-2007-011)