Relationships Between Men’s and Women’s Body Image and Their Psychological, Social, and Sexual Functioning

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This study was designed to examine the relationships between different aspects of body image and psychological, social, and sexual functioning throughout adulthood. The respondents were 211 men and 226 women (age range 18–86 years; mean = 42.26). Respondents completed measures of self-rated attractiveness, body satisfaction, body image importance, body image behaviors, appearance comparison, social physique anxiety, self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and social and sexual functioning. Body image was associated with self-esteem for all groups, but was unrelated to other aspects of psychological, social, and sexual functioning. There were some exceptions; a disturbance in body image was related to problematic social and sexual functioning among middle-aged men and to depression and anxiety symptoms in late adulthood among men and women. Middle-aged men who presented with the type of body image disturbance typical of women were more likely to have impaired interpersonal functioning. These results demonstrate that social aspects of body image appear to be important in understanding psychological functioning in later life.

KEY WORDS: body image; gender differences; developmental differences; psychological functioning; social functioning; sexual functioning.

The term body image is typically used to refer to perceptions and attitudes individuals hold about their bodies, although some authors argue that body image is a broader term, which encompasses behavioral aspects, such as weight loss attempts, and other indicators of investment in appearance (Banfield & McCabe, 2002). Women are generally considered to hold a more negative body image than men (Feingold & Mazzella, 1998). As a result, body dissatisfaction among women has been labeled a “normative discontent” (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985). However, through the use of gender-sensitive instruments that conceptualize body image concerns in terms of a desire to gain muscle, as well as to lose weight, previous beliefs that men are largely resilient to concerns about their appearance have been challenged, and there is now considerable evidence to suggest that young men are also dissatisfied with their bodies (Abell & Richards, 1996; Drewnowski & Yee, 1987).

A broad conceptualization of body image may prove important in understanding the nature of the construct among men, who appear to be less inclined than women to report holding negative attitudes toward their bodies, but do report a strong motivation to improve the appearance of their bodies (Davison, 2002). It may also be helpful to consider body image broadly when investigating its role throughout adulthood. Although the majority of research is limited to college samples, body image concerns appear to extend into later life (Montepare, 1996), and different age-related changes have been found among both men and women (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2003; Hartman, Gronendyke, & Thomas, 1985). However, few researchers have systematically explored the development of different aspects of body image throughout the period of adulthood.

Although there has been a large body of research on the prevalence of body image concerns and...
potential factors associated with the development of body image, few researchers have systematically investigated the role body image plays in the day-to-day lives of individuals, beyond disturbed eating behaviors. In the present study we addressed this gap by exploring the association between body image and psychological, social, and sexual functioning among adult men and women. An innovative aspect of this study is the conceptualization of body image from a number of different aspects, making use of multiple gender-sensitive instruments, in order to understand the differential roles played by various aspects of body image. In addition, this study extends our understanding of the role of body image for adult men and women throughout the community, rather than focusing only on college students.

The associations between a disturbance in body image and psychological, social, and sexual dysfunction for different populations are currently not well understood. Previous researchers have demonstrated a relationship between body image and self-esteem among women in early adulthood (Abell & Richards, 1996; Monteath & McCabe, 1997) and in later years (Paxton & Phythian, 1999). This has led some authors to conceptualize women’s body image as a component of a multidimensional global self-esteem (Marsh, 1997; O’Brien & Epstein, 1988). There are also preliminary indications that young women who report dissatisfaction with their physiques are at a greater risk of experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety (Koenig & Wasserman, 1995; Mintz & Betz, 1986), although this relationship is less well understood among older women. There are inconsistencies in the literature, however, and it appears that results may be dependent on the particular aspect of body image measured. For example, self-esteem has been found to be unrelated to weight concerns among young women (Silberstein, Striegel-Moore, Timko, & Rodin, 1986), but strongly related to overall physical appearance (Harter, 1999). Researchers have not previously attempted to determine systematically which body image measures are most closely associated with different facets of psychological functioning. The importance of body image for the psychological functioning of men is particularly unclear, as inconsistent findings among young men stem in part from the use of different instruments, which vary in their sensitivity to measure aspects of body image most relevant to the lives of men. Of particular concern is the absence of research on the relationship between body image and self-esteem, depression, and anxiety among men from the general population.

A gap also exists in our knowledge of whether a disturbance in body image is relevant to interpersonal functioning. In the 1960s and 1970s, social psychologists demonstrated the positive impact of being considered physically attractive by others on desirability as a potential dating or romantic partner (Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971; Walster, Aronson, & Abrahams, 1966). Less commonly researched, however, are the social implications of an individual’s own rating of his or her attractiveness or other aspects of body image. There are preliminary indications in research with college students of an association between being concerned about one’s appearance and impaired social functioning. College students who perceive themselves as unattractive have been shown to be more likely to avoid cross-sex interactions (Mitchell & Orr, 1976), to engage in less intimate social interactions with members of the same and other sex (Nezlek, 1988), and to experience higher levels of social anxiety (Feingold, 1992). Negative body image may also be related to problematic sexual functioning. Researchers have found that college students with poor views of their bodies are more likely than others to avoid sexual activities (Faith & Schare, 1993), to perceive themselves as unskilled sexual partners (Holmes, Chamberlin, & Young, 1994), and to report dissatisfaction with their sex lives (Hoyt & Kogan, 2001). However, other researchers have failed to find a relationship between body image and sexual functioning; Wiederman and Hurst (1997), for example, suggested that sexuality was related to objective attractiveness among women, but not to self-ratings of their appearance.

Remarkably few researchers have made explicit reference to the social context when investigating body image, which has resulted in the impression that body image evaluations and behaviors occur in social isolation. Recently, however, there is a growing awareness of the social nature of body image among female college students through their engagement in comparisons of their own appearance with that of others; such comparisons appear to be associated with negative evaluations of their bodies (Stormer & Thompson, 1996; Thompson, Heinberg, & Tantleff, 1991). In addition, researchers have found that a concern about others evaluating one’s body negatively, a variable termed social physique anxiety, is related to low levels of body satisfaction (Hart, Leary, & Rejeski, 1989). This suggests that evaluations individuals make of their bodies