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Brief research report

Sexual body esteem and mindfulness in college women

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ABSTRACT

Literature suggests that many young women hold negative perceptions of their sexual bodies and facial features. This may be related to deficits in mindfulness, manifested by rigid and automatic thoughts, feelings, and behavior about one's sexual body. The present study examined the relationships between the five factors of mindfulness measured by the Five Factor Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) and sexual body esteem, measured by the Sexual Attractiveness subscale of the Body Esteem Scale (BES) in 79 college women. A multiple regression was performed to examine the relationship between sexual body esteem and the factors of mindfulness. The Observing and Describing subscales were significantly and positively predictive of sexual body esteem while Non-reactivity to Inner Experience was significantly and negatively predictive of sexual body esteem. This relationship may have implications for future research and clinical practice.

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Introduction

The college years represent a time when young women transition into adulthood and begin to develop aspects of their identities that will impact their emotional functioning and health behaviors as adults (di Mauro, 1995). Body esteem, typically defined as the perceptions and beliefs an individual holds about their body, is one of the most salient areas of identity exploration for college women. More specifically, college women are beginning to explore how their bodies relate to their sexual identity and develop perceptions of their sexual bodies. These perceptions, known as sexual body esteem, refer specifically to attitudes women have towards their body parts, facial attractiveness, and sexuality (Franzoi & Shields, 1984). Unfortunately, the perceptions and attitudes college women develop towards their bodies are not always positive. Research suggests that nearly 50% of college women express negative feelings about different parts of their body and nearly 20% express negative feelings about their sexual bodies (Monteath & McCabe, 1997). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that 35% of college women are reportedly selfconsciousness about their bodies during sexual activity (Wiederman, 2000).

There are consequences of poor sexual body esteem. Unhappiness in women, defined as poor overall well-being and general life dissatisfaction, has been found to be correlated with negative body

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esteem in general and is most strongly related to negative sexual body esteem (Stokes & Frederick-Recascino, 2003). Recent research also demonstrated that negative sexual body esteem impairs young women's sexual functioning. For example, women who report self-consciousness about or dissatisfaction with their body during sexual experiences report lower self-assertiveness during sexual intercourse, more avoidance of sexual activity, and impaired self-efficacy to experience arousal and achieve an orgasm (Cash, Maikkula, & Yamamiya, 2004; Wiederman, 2000; Yamamiya, Cash, & Thompson, 2006).

Negative sexual body esteem may be associated with automatic, rigid and distorted cognitions, feelings and behaviors. The majority of the research has focused its examination on body esteem in general, rather than sexual body esteem. For example, Farrell, Shafran, and Fairburn (2004) found that women who reported high levels of dissatisfaction with their bodies were more likely to engage in automatic checking behaviors (pinching or wobbling) when looking in the mirror. These behaviors are often associated with automatic negative thoughts and emotions. Research has also revealed that negative sexual body esteem is likely related to the internalization of these automatic and rigid thoughts and feelings. For example, researchers have established that women who automatically accept and internalize media messages are more likely to experience negative body esteem (Cattarin, Thompson, Thomas, & Williams, 2000; Knauss, Paxton, & Alsaker, 2007; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994). Negative body esteem can also be characterized by distorted and rigid processing. Jansen, Nederkoorn, and Mulkens (2005) found that women with negative body esteem are more likely to direct their visual attention to their perceived negative body parts, while

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directing their visual attention to other women's body parts that they perceive as positive.

Some research has found that processing biases have also been observed with regards to sexual body esteem. This concept is known as "spectoring," and refers to the tendency of women with negative views of their sexual bodies to cognitively fixate on negative aspects of their body during sexual experiences (Faith & Schare, 1993; Masters & Johnson, 1970). Spectoring, or body self-focused attention during sexual activity, produces cognitive distraction which is linked with increased avoidance of sexual activity and decreased sexual functioning (Cash et al., 2004; Dove & Wiederman, 2000; Faith & Schare, 1993).

The automaticity and inflexibility that characterizes the thoughts and behaviors of women with negative sexual body esteem, may be described as mindlessness, which is defined by rule-governed behavior, rigid thinking patterns and automatic emotional experiences. Mindfulness (the antithesis of mindlessness) involves observing and describing one's internal experiences (emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations) without reacting to them (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Kritetemeyer, & Toney, 2006). In relation to sexual body esteem, a mindful state would allow an individual to experience negative emotions, thoughts and external messages about their sexual body without fixating on them or automatically accepting them as absolute truth. This flexibility allows for an openness to experience a wide range of thoughts and emotions and act with intention, rather than automaticity (Stewart, 2004).

Although clinical research has begun to examine the relationship between mindfulness and general body esteem (Stewart. 2004), there is currently a paucity of research examining the relationship between mindfulness and sexual body esteem. The present study aimed to objectively examine this relationship. Specifically, we measured the tendency of college women to be mindful in daily life, across five domains (Observe, Describe, Acting with Awareness, Non-judgment of Inner Experience, Non-reactivity to Inner Experience), and how this tendency related to their ratings of sexual body esteem. It was hypothesized that as participants' scores on the five different domains of the Five Factor Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ; Baer et al., 2006) increased, so would their scores on the Sexual Attractiveness subscale of the Body Esteem Scale (BES; Franzoi & Shields, 1984). In other words, participants who reported being more mindful in their daily lives would rate themselves as having higher sexual body esteem when compared to participants who reported being less mindful.

Method

Participants

Participants were 79 female undergraduates attending a religious-affiliated university. The women ranged in age from 18 to 25 (Mean age = 21.61) and were predominantly Caucasian (81%), heterosexual (92.4%), and Roman Catholic (73.4%). As an incentive, the women received extra credit in an undergraduate class.

Measures

Demographics

The participants completed a demographic questionnaire, which solicited information regarding age, year in college, race, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness was assessed using the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ; Baer et al., 2006). The development of the scale was based on a factor analysis of five established mindfulness scales: Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (Brown & Ryan, 2003); Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Skills (Baer, Smith, & Allen, 2004); Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (Buchheld, Grossman, & Walach, 2001); Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale (Feldman, Hayes, Kumar, Greeson, & Laurenceau, 2007); The Mindfulness Questionnaire (Chadwick et al., 2005). The analyses yielded five factors: Observing (attending to internal and external experiences), Describing (verbal labeling of internal and external experiences), Acting with Awareness (not functioning in "automatic pilot"), Non-judging of Inner Experience (experiencing thoughts and feelings without judgment or evaluation), and Non-reactivity to Inner Experience (allowing thoughts and feelings to occur without reacting to them or attempting to alter them). Each facet contains seven or eight items. In the present sample, the alpha coefficients ranged from .72 to .90, suggesting adequate to good internal consistency.

Sexual body esteem

Sexual body esteem was assessed using the Body Esteem Scale (BES; Franzoi & Shields, 1984). The BES is a 35-item measure which asks individuals to rate the way they feel about various body parts on a 5-point Likert scale. A factor analysis revealed that the BES is a multidimensional construct consisting of three distinct factors for females: Sexual Attractiveness, Weight Concern and Physical Condition. For the present study, the Sexual Attractiveness subscale of the BES was examined. This subscale assesses women's perceptions of their Sexual Attractiveness. Items loaded on this factor involve women's perception of their facial features and sexual body parts. In the present sample, the alpha coefficient was .86 suggesting good internal consistency. The other two subscales on the BES, Weight Concern subscale (coefficient alpha of .89) and the Physical Condition subscale (coefficient alpha of .89), also demonstrated good internal consistency.

Procedures

Participants were recruited from a larger study examining sexual health behaviors in college women. They were provided with directions to access PsychData, an online confidential database designed for social science research. Participants entered a survey code which prompted the informed consent. The website prompted participants to complete various measures. For the present study, the demographics, the FFMQ, and the BES were examined. These measures were developed as paper and pencil questionnaires; however, research has demonstrated that computer-based administration of paper questionnaires is equivalent with regards to reliability and validity (Gwaltney, Shields, & Shiffman, 2008).

Results

Correlations were calculated to examine the relationships between the five facets of mindfulness, as measured by the five subscales of the FFMQ, and sexual body esteem, as measured by the Sexual Attractiveness subscale of the BES. As Table 1 summarizes, the analysis revealed that the Sexual Attractiveness subscale of the BES was positively and significantly correlated with three subscales of the FFMQ: Acting with Awareness (r = .27, p = .02), Observing (r = .27, p = .02) and Describing (r = .40, p < .01). The Non-reactivity to Inner Experience subscale (r = .05, p = .34) and the Non-judgment of Inner Experience subscale (r = .15, p = .10) did not significantly correlate with the Sexual Attractiveness subscale of the BES.

A multiple regression was run in order to examine whether, together, the five factors of mindfulness predict sexual body

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