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# Characteristics and behaviors associated with body image in male domestic violence offenders

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## Abstract

Investigated correlates of body image satisfaction and perceived weight class (underweight, average weight, overweight) in a sample of male domestic violence offenders. Men who identified themselves as either underweight or overweight reported poorer body image satisfaction than those who perceived themselves to be of average weight. Poor body image satisfaction was found to be related to increased risk for both physical and verbal aggression, the tendency to have been a bully and/or a victim of bullying in childhood, and increased alcohol use. Although masculinity was expected to be an important intervening construct, partially explaining the relationship of body image to the major predictor variables, it was not correlated with any of the variables in this study. Finally, perceived weight class was not found to be significantly related to any of the predictor variables.

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## 1. Introduction

The term *body image* is typically used within two main contexts. The first applies to misperceptions about one's own body size or shape, while the second refers to perceptions of how other people evaluate one's body (Cash, 1989; Garner & Garfinkel, 1981; Rucker & Cash, 1992). It is in the latter sense that body image is addressed in this study. Body image concerns may focus on the body as a whole or on specific parts of the body (Cash, 1989). Distress resulting from negative body image can range from mild to severe enough to impair

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functioning (Valtolina, 1998). Data on the reliability of body image indicate that it is relatively stable across time, suggesting that body image can be considered a reliable construct. In addition, measurements of body image have been shown to have predictive validity. This is evidenced by their relationship to a variety of prognostic and psychopathological variables (Garner & Garfinkel, 1981).

The nature of body image concerns differs between men and women. Women almost always report a desire to be thinner (Cash, 1993; Theron, Nel, & Lubbe, 1991). Men, on the other hand, report both a desire to be thinner as well as a desire to gain weight. So whereas women may categorize themselves as either “acceptable weight” or “overweight,” men seem to focus on three categories: “underweight,” “average weight,” and “overweight.” Generally, men who desire to gain weight are not interested in increasing the amount of body fat. Rather, they have a desire to be more muscular (Chan & Swalm, 1998; Davis & Cowles, 1991; Drewnowski & Yee, 1987; Wang, Yesalis, Fitzhugh, Buckley, & Smicklas-Wright, 1994). The observation that male body image often includes a desire for muscularity influenced the design of the present study. That muscular bodies may reflect a masculine body ideal suggests that men with poor body image may feel less masculine and try to compensate through a variety of means.

Men who are dissatisfied with their general masculinity may engage in violent or aggressive behavior as a means to define their manliness, since aggression is a stereotypically masculine trait (Bourgois, 1996; Levant, 1992; Richardson, Kenneth, Taylor, & Hammock, 1994). Correlations between domestic and sexual violence and threats to traditional social and economic concepts of masculinity have been reported (Bourgois, 1996). Further, experimental data have demonstrated a causal link between threats to masculinity, operationalized as female confederates denigrating male participants’ physical strength, and aggression toward women, delivered as “bogus” electric shock (Richardson et al., 1984). When the aggression is directed at a woman, one proposed explanation is that the man who feels unmasculine fears retaliation from another man, whom he may perceive as more masculine than himself. However, he may feel more confident in his ability to assert physical power over a woman. Therefore, he is likely to take the “path of least resistance” when attempting to prove his manhood through violence (Weisbuch, Beal, & O’Neal, 1999).

Negative body image is related to both teasing and bullying in childhood (Cash, Winstead, & Janada, 1986; Grilo, Wilfley, Brownell, & Rodin, 1994; Snow & Cunningham, 1985; Thompson & Psaltis, 1988). In particular, several retrospective studies have affirmed that a recollection of teasing about physical appearance in childhood is related to poor body image in adulthood (Cash et al., 1986; Grilo et al., 1994; Thompson & Psaltis, 1988). However, studies of teasing have examined the relationship between teasing and body image in women, rather than men. With respect to the tendency to bully peers in childhood, although a causal relationship has not been proven, some have suggested that boys engage in acts of aggression against their peers to prove their manliness. This is particularly true of adolescents, because they do not have more mature means, such as a job or family from which to form a masculine identity (Snow & Cunningham, 1985).

Further, for men, masculinity is correlated with the use of alcohol. Heavy alcohol use can be considered an attempt to adopt a masculine identity, reject a feminine identity, or to do both. Men appear to use alcohol in order to overemphasize their masculine identities. This is

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