



The experience of body dissatisfaction in men

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Abstract

Evidence suggests that the prevalence of body dissatisfaction (BD) is increasing amongst men. However, research has commonly examined the phenomenon in predominantly female groups. In view of this, the current study used a qualitative methodology to explore the experience of BD in men. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 men. The data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Analysis yielded themes across four domains (societal, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and social presentation). Whilst participants exhibited a range of appearance concerns, there was commonality in the processes by which these were experienced and managed. These generic issues are the focus of the themes, and could usefully be incorporated into a new assessment tool. Findings are considered in relation to existing (cognitive behavioural, self-discrepancy, and sociocultural) theories, and implications for clinical practice and future research are discussed.

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Introduction

There is general consensus that “body image” comprises two components: perceptual (i.e. size estimation), and attitudinal (i.e. one’s thoughts and feelings about the body; Skrzypek, Wehmeier, & Remschmidt, 2001). Therefore, body image dysfunction can exist both as perceptual distortion, and as attitudinal body dissatisfaction (BD; Skrzypek et al., 2001). Recent evidence suggests that the prevalence of BD amongst men is increasing (Garner, 1997). Moreover, body image disturbance appears to be associated

with eating disorders (e.g. Kearney-Cooke & Steichen-Asch, 1990), “muscle dysmorphia” (Pope, Gruber, Choi, Olivardia, & Phillips, 1997), and steroid abuse (e.g. Blouin & Goldfield, 1995) in men.

Despite this, previous research has most often explored the relationship between BD and eating disorders predominantly in females. Evidence indicating that male BD may differ qualitatively to that of females suggests that findings from female samples cannot simply be applied to males. For example, women commonly want to lose weight, whilst men are more typically divided into those wishing to gain and those wishing to lose weight (e.g. Drewnowski & Yee, 1987). In their recent review, McCabe and Ricciardelli (2004) note that the focus within the literature on issues typically more

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relevant to female groups has led to an incomplete understanding of male BD.

Conceptually, the existing literature has drawn on a number of theories to explain the development and maintenance of BD, including cognitive behavioural, self-discrepancy, and sociocultural frameworks. Cognitive behavioural theory (Cash, 2002a) posits that the activation of appearance-related schemas triggers the experience of BD in terms of negative thoughts and affect, which prompts the use of cognitive and behavioural coping strategies. Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) predicts that perceived incongruence between one's "actual" and one's "ideal" (i.e. what one would like to be) or "ought" (i.e. what one feels one should be) self will engender negative affect. A number of researchers have drawn on this perspective in relation to BD (e.g. Cash & Szymanski, 1995; Szymanski & Cash, 1995). Self-discrepancy theory is consistent with sociocultural models (e.g. Stice, 2002), which suggest that societal norms may be internalised as personal ideals. In addition, sociocultural theories highlight comparison with others, as well as the observation of dissatisfied behaviour by others, as significant in promoting distress. In keeping with these models, insight into each of the triggers, experience, and behavioural outcomes is critical to an understanding of BD in men. Further exploratory work must necessarily take account of this scope.

Qualitative approaches are particularly suitable for exploratory investigation. Currently, only a small body of qualitative research has examined the phenomenon of BD in men. In their focus groups with boys and men, Grogan and Richards (2002) examined participants' satisfaction with body weight and shape in relation to their perceived ideals, as well as diet and exercise behaviours. Participants across all age groups recognised a similar, mesomorphic ideal, while there were negative connotations associated with overweight, and with excessive muscularity. In relation to BD, participants presented an interesting discourse of "not being bothered" to exercise for the sake of appearance alone. However, the authors note that this lack of concern was in clear contrast to the importance participants placed on appearance in relation to social acceptance. These findings highlight the complexity inherent in the experience of BD; understanding of the phenomenon requires more than just *identification* of triggers and outcome behaviours, but exploration of

how these operate within the current social climate. Grogan and Richards' (2002) findings provide an interesting perspective on male responses to BD, but focus specifically on diet and exercise behaviours. A comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon requires exploration of wider coping strategies. For example, in their focus group discussions with men, Fawcner and McMurray (2002) noted that, whilst in keeping with self-discrepancy theory all men reported self-comparison with media images, not all participants experienced distress. Indeed, a number of themes may actually represent adaptive coping responses. For example, some participants described identifying with alternative ideals, while others reported acceptance of themselves.

Whilst Fawcner and McMurray's (2002) findings relate specifically to the influence of media ideals, Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia (2000) highlight the role of the wider social milieu, proposing that male body image and muscularity in particular has become increasingly important in defining masculinity, alongside changes in both male and female gender roles that negate traditional masculine identities. Certainly, evidence suggests that not only is the hegemonic male ideal muscular, but that it is becoming more so. Male bodies, both as depicted in Playgirl centrefolds (Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001) and action figure toys (Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999) have become increasingly muscular over time. In addition to broader society, family and peers may act as a further sociocultural influence on BD (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004), whilst Cash (2002a) highlights mood state as a possible internal trigger. Further exploration is required to determine which factors may be relevant to men.

Current findings regarding the experience of BD in men remain limited. Qualitative studies have proven helpful in highlighting the complexities of male experiences. In order to add to this body of research, this study aimed to explore the phenomenological experience of male BD, taking account of both triggers to, and outcome of BD within each of the cognitive, behavioural, and affective modalities.

Methods

The phenomenon of BD in men was investigated using semi-structured interview data using Interpre-

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