



Exploring the utility of emotional awareness and negative affect in predicting body satisfaction and body distortion

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ABSTRACT

In a sample of 304 female college students, the present study examined how body image is associated with (a) clarity of emotion; (b) attention to emotion; and (c) negative affect. Two separate facets of body image were examined: body satisfaction and body distortion. Greater clarity of emotion was associated with greater body satisfaction and less body distortion, and these associations could not be accounted for by negative affect. Body satisfaction was significantly predicted by the three-way interaction of clarity of emotion, attention to emotion, and negative affect. Attention to emotion moderated the association between clarity of emotion and body satisfaction only among high negative affect individuals. Specifically, greater clarity of emotion was associated with greater body satisfaction in all participants except those who were high in both negative affect and attention to emotion.

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Introduction

Body image disturbances have been linked to psychological distress and maladaptive behaviors such as binge eating, restrictive dieting, self-induced vomiting, and repetitive body-modifying procedures (Hrabosky et al., 2009; Levine & Piran, 2004; Stice, Burton, & Shaw, 2004). In addition, body concerns can manifest as excessive comparisons with others' bodies, avoidance of situations that increase evaluative thoughts and feelings about individuals' bodies, and repetitive body-checking behaviors (Delinsky & Wilson, 2006). Body image is generally considered to be composed of a perceptual and an attitudinal component (Gardner & Brown, 2010). The perceptual component refers to the "mental picture" that individuals have of their bodies, and is often measured as the degree to which they distort the size and shape of their bodies (body distortion). The attitudinal component refers to the thoughts and feelings that individuals have about their bodies and is commonly measured as individuals' satisfaction with the appearance of their bodies (body satisfaction). Multiple studies have demonstrated that these two components are distinguishable from each other, and should therefore be measured separately (Cash & Green, 1986; Gardner, 2001; Gardner & Brown, 2010; Garner & Garfinkel, 1981).

It is likely that body image and the behavioral manifestations of body image disturbances are associated with a variety of emotional disturbances (Berenbaum, Raghavan, Le, Vernon, & Gomez, 2003).

Berenbaum et al. (2003) described a taxonomy of emotional disturbances, including three broad types: (a) emotion disconnections which are dissociations between different facets, or processes, of the emotion system; (b) emotional valence disturbances which are marked by the presence of excessive or deficient quantities of pleasant or unpleasant emotions; and (c) emotional intensity/regulation disturbances which are captured by the emotional intensity with which individuals tend to respond. They also called attention to the dearth of psychopathology research exploring the breadth of emotional disturbances. In the body image literature, a similar trend can be observed. A great deal of research has examined the relation between body image and emotional valence disturbances, specifically elevated levels of negative affect. Numerous studies have found that higher levels of negative affect are associated with both body satisfaction (e.g., Annesi & Gorjala, 2010; Lattimore & Hutchinson, 2010) and body distortion (e.g., Baker, Williamson, & Sylve, 1995; Farrell, Lee, & Shafran, 2005; Plies & Florin, 1992; Taylor & Cooper, 1992). However, remarkably little research has examined the relation between body image and emotion disconnections.

In the current study, we explored the relation between body image and emotional awareness, which can be considered an aspect of emotion disconnections. Emotional awareness can be divided into two distinguishable components (Coffey, Berenbaum, & Kerns, 2003; Gohm & Clore, 2000, 2002): (a) attention to emotions, which is the extent to which one attends to and values one's own emotions, and (b) clarity of emotions, which is the extent to which one can identify and describe one's own emotions. Past research (Coffey et al., 2003; Gohm & Clore, 2000, 2002; Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007) has found that these two dimensions

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underlie related constructs such as trait emotional intelligence and alexithymia. Furthermore, clarity of emotion is associated with interoceptive awareness, which assesses awareness of internal body states, such as hunger, and identification of emotions (Tylka & Subich, 2004).

To our knowledge, only one study has examined the relationship between body distortion and emotional awareness and seven studies have examined the association between body satisfaction, or related constructs, and emotional awareness. De Berardis et al. (2007, 2009) examined the relationship between alexithymia and body satisfaction in undergraduate female samples. They found that greater clarity of emotions was associated with greater body satisfaction and that there was no significant association between attention to emotions and body satisfaction. Tylka and Subich (2004) also found clarity of emotions was associated with greater body satisfaction in a female undergraduate sample. In female college samples, Myers and Crowther (2008) and Tylka and Hill (2004) found that clarity of emotion was associated with constructs associated with body satisfaction, specifically body shame and self-objectification. Sim and Zeman (2006) found that emotional awareness and body satisfaction were associated in a sample of pre-adolescent and adolescent girls (ages 9–15). Unfortunately, they did not distinguish between attention to emotions and clarity of emotions, making it unclear how the individual components of emotional awareness are associated with body satisfaction. Swami, Begum, and Petrides (2010) examined associations between trait emotional intelligence, body distortion, and body satisfaction in a female college sample. They found that their measure of trait emotional intelligence, which includes but is not limited to emotional awareness, predicted both body satisfaction and body distortion. To our knowledge, this is the only study to examine the association between emotional awareness and body distortion. However, since the researchers did not measure the individual components of emotional awareness, it is unclear how attention to emotion and clarity of emotion are associated with body distortion. In sum, there has been little research examining the relation between emotional awareness, body satisfaction, and body distortion and no research examining the relation between the individual components of emotional awareness and body distortion.

An indirect reason to expect emotional awareness to be associated with body image can be derived from previous work on mindfulness, which bears some resemblance to emotional awareness. Specifically, two components of mindfulness described by Siegel (2007; i.e., attending to sensations, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings; describing sensations, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings) are similar to attention to emotion and clarity of emotion, respectively. Several researchers have proposed that body image and mindfulness should be associated (e.g., Dijkstra & Barelds, 2011), and mindfulness-based interventions have been employed in the treatment of both body image disturbances and eating disorders that are tied to body image disturbances (e.g., Baer, Fischer, & Huss, 2006; Wolever & Best, 2009). To our knowledge, only two studies have investigated the associations between body satisfaction and mindfulness. In both a sample of parents and children (Dekeyser, Raes, Leijssen, Leysen, & Dewulf, 2008), and a female sample (Dijkstra & Barelds, 2011), body satisfaction was found to be positively associated with mindfulness. No previous studies have investigated the associations between body distortion and mindfulness.

The present research tested six hypotheses. Our first two hypotheses concerned negative affect and were based on previous research. We hypothesized that we would replicate previous findings that: (a) negative affect would be negatively associated with body satisfaction; and (b) negative affect would be positively associated with body distortion.

Our third and fourth hypotheses concerned clarity of emotion. We hypothesized that: (a) lower levels of clarity of emotion would be associated with lower levels of body satisfaction; and (b) lower levels of clarity of emotion would be associated with higher levels of body distortion. We had empirical reasons for generating our third and fourth hypotheses. As already mentioned, clarity of emotion has repeatedly been found to be positively associated with body satisfaction, and hence we hypothesized that these two variables would be positively associated in the present study as well. Similarly, clarity of emotion has repeatedly been found to be positively correlated with desirable outcomes, such as feelings of positive well-being and life satisfaction (Gohm & Clore, 2002; Palmer, Donaldson, & Stough, 2008), and to be negatively correlated with undesirable outcomes, such as negative affect, neuroticism, and a range of psychopathology, including depression, anxiety, and personality disorders (Berenbaum, Boden, Baker, Dizen, Thompson, & Abramowitz, 2006; Coffey et al., 2003; Fernández-Berrocá, Alcaide, Extremera, & Pizarro, 2006; Le, Berenbaum, & Raghavan, 2002; Leible & Snell, 2004). Because negative psychological outcomes have been associated with low clarity of emotions, we hypothesized that body distortion would be negatively associated with clarity of emotions.

We also had theoretical reasons for generating our third and fourth hypotheses. Emotions provide people with information about their environment, which has implications in shaping their judgments, decisions, priorities, and actions (Clore & Huntsinger, 2007; Schwarz, 1990; Schwarz & Clore, 1983). Clore is one of several researchers who have proposed the “affect-as-information” hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, affect influences individuals’ judgments of objects by providing bodily and experiential information about those objects (Clore & Huntsinger, 2007). However, individuals differ in the extent to which they are clear about how they feel about the salient objects in their environment, which could influence the effectiveness of their judgments. Specifically, individuals who have greater clarity of emotions, who better understand the source and type of their emotions, are likely to make more informed judgments and decisions based on their emotions (Gohm & Clore, 2002). Therefore, having greater clarity of emotions is expected to be associated with better psychological outcomes. Accordingly, we hypothesized that individuals who are less clear about their emotions will make less informed judgments and decisions regarding salient objects (e.g., their bodies) based on their emotions, and hence will have less body satisfaction and greater body distortion.

Our fifth and sixth hypotheses concerned attention to emotion. We hypothesized that we would find a three-way interaction between negative affect, attention to emotion, and clarity of emotion in the prediction of (a) body satisfaction and (b) body distortion. We had empirical reasons for making these predictions. In contrast to the consistent findings regarding associations between clarity of emotion and various psychological outcomes, findings from research on attention to emotion are more varied. While some studies have found that negative psychological outcomes are associated with greater attention to emotion (e.g., Kerns, 2005; Salovey, 2001), other studies have found that negative psychological outcomes are associated with diminished attention to emotion (e.g., Moon & Berenbaum, 2009). Still other studies have found no significant associations between attention to emotion and psychological outcomes (e.g., Berenbaum et al., 2006). One possible explanation for these inconsistent findings is that attention to emotion moderates the effects of other variables on psychological outcomes. In fact, evidence of such moderation has been found in previous research (examining outcomes such as affective well-being and magical thinking) in which associations with clarity of emotion were moderated by attention to emotion (e.g., Berenbaum, Boden, & Baker, 2009; Lischetzke & Eid, 2003).

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