



Development and validation of a Body Image Guilt and Shame Scale

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the psychometric properties of the Body Image Guilt and Shame Scale (BIGSS). Undergraduate students ($n = 87$ women, $n = 66$ men) completed the BIGSS, the Test of Self-consciousness (‘TOSCA’), scales assessing body image concern and importance, social physique anxiety, and personal and social identity. A factor analysis indicated that a two-factor solution reflecting guilt and shame was the most parsimonious explanation of the data from the BIGSS responses. An additional factor analysis of the BIGSS and TOSCA responses indicated that the responses could be divided between generalised guilt, generalised shame, body image guilt, and body image shame dimensions. The BIGSS guilt and shame dimensions also demonstrated strong internal consistency and item/item total correlations especially when Item 10 was deleted. Consistent with predictions, BIGSS guilt and shame were positively correlated with social physique anxiety, body image concern, and body image importance, demonstrating construct validity. © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

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1. Introduction

For many if not most women in Western societies, being a woman means experiencing some apprehension over the extent to which one’s body shape matches the culturally defined ideal. Where there is a perception that one’s body shape fails to approximate this ideal, dissatisfaction is likely to result. As is now well-documented, this dissatisfaction with one’s body and vulnerability to external sociocultural pressures has important implications for the development of a range of clinical symptomatology and has been found to be the single strongest predictor of eating

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disorders in young people (e.g. Phelps, Johnston, & Augustyniak, 1999). This link is particularly strong in the case of women (e.g. Fallon & Rozin, 1985; Muth & Cash, 1997). In the view of several researchers, current preoccupations with thinness and dieting in women may have contributed to the large increase in eating disorders over the past several decades (e.g. Burney & Irwin, 2000; Garner & Garfinkel, 1980; Thompson & Schwartz, 1982).

1.1. Body dissatisfaction as a sociocultural phenomenon

Biogenetic explanations have not been able to account for the current preoccupation with thinness and dieting, nor the greater reporting of body dissatisfaction among women relative to men. Several explanations based on sociocultural pressures and external socially mediated psychological factors have been offered in an attempt to clarify the basis of what has been described as a “normative discontent” among non-eating disordered women (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985).

Cash and Henry (1995) suggest that women are socialised from a very young age to be oriented to others to receive validation of their self-worth, and that society tends to reward women with thin bodies. Obesity is negatively sanctioned in women—far more so than in men—and is seen as a product of lack of self-control. Bruch (1978) noted that there appears to be a ‘thinness = femininity = happiness’ life equation, with thinness being synonymous with happiness.

Brownmiller (1984) contends that the specific areas of physical attractiveness and weight may be primary competitive domains where women are encouraged to contend with each other, citing evidence that women report conducting fleeting, automatic comparisons with female occupants upon entering a room in order to assess where they are positioned in terms of who is fatter, and who is more attractive.

1.2. Gender differences in body image concerns

It is increasingly not only women who feel pressures to compare favourably with cultural ideals. Many men are far from immune to maladaptive body image problems (Ricciardelli & Glynn, 1998), with body image discontent now recognised in men (e.g. Drewnowski & Yee, 1987; Fawcner & McMurray, 1999; Muth & Cash, 1997).

However, men and women may express their body image concerns in different ways. While body esteem is a crucial factor in the development of dissatisfaction with one’s body (Phelps et al., 1999) the effect of such dissatisfaction on one’s overall level of self-esteem is determined by the relative importance of that domain to one’s self-definition. On this basis, failure to match an ideal in an area of central importance to the individual (e.g. physique) will prove more damaging to self-worth than inadequacy in a domain of lesser importance.

Contrary to findings for women, men’s body dissatisfaction is a two-tailed phenomenon involving both ends of a weight continuum. Empirical research has found that men who are either above or below the acceptable range in their Body Mass Index scores, tend to be especially dissatisfied with their physical appearance (Drewnowski & Yee, 1987; Muth & Cash, 1997).

1.3. Social physique anxiety

Social physique anxiety—the anxiety experienced by individuals in response to others’ aesthetic evaluations of their physique (Hart, Leary, & Rejeski, 1989)—has been found to be a stronger

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