

**I FEEL HAPPIER BECAUSE I HAVE HOPE THAT I CAN DO
WHATEVER I WANT WITH MY BODY: A QUALITATIVE
INVESTIGATION OF BODY IMAGE AND APPEARANCE
CONCERNS IN THOSE RECENTLY ENGAGED IN REGULAR
EXERCISE AND EXPLORATION OF COGNITIVE, PHYSICAL
AND SOCIAL MEDIATING VARIABLES.**

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Introduction

Research has demonstrated that engaging in exercise can be beneficial not only to one's physical and psychological health, such as reduced stress levels and higher self-esteem (Scully, Kremer, Meade, Graham & Dudgeon, 1998), but also can lead to improvements in body image (Campbell & Hausenblas, 2009). Small effect sizes and equivocal findings in the literature however suggests that the relationship between body image and exercise is a complex one and not well understood (Martin & Litchenberger, 2004).

Objectives

This qualitative investigation aims to elucidate these contradictory research findings and investigate the relationship between exercise and body image through exploring the role of social, cognitive and physical factors through the voices of those just starting regular exercise.

Method

Ethical approval for this study was obtained by the University of the West of England Faculty of Health and Life Sciences Ethics Committee. Seven men and seven women were recruited via posters being placed in English fitness centres and on an English university participant volunteer scheme (University of the West of England). Participants' age ranged from 18 to 28 (mean age 20) and had been exercising on average for seven weeks. One to one semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviews were recorded verbatim, transcribed and analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

Five key themes emerged from the data relating to the role of appearance related-motivations and the exercise environment:

'The Malleable Body'

Participants expressed strong beliefs that if they invested in their appearance, they could achieve their ideal body and this theme centred around how

participants' constructed exercise as a means of moulding the body to their ideal physique, giving them a feeling of control over their appearance. For some participants, seeing physical changes reinforced the construct of the malleable body, and this enabled them to feel as though they had greater control to continue to change their bodies in the future to meet their body ideals, giving them a sense of optimism.

'Female Obligation to Exercise'

Female participants in particular appeared to feel a certain sense of responsibility in investing in their bodies, particularly for the opposite sex, and one female discussed how she felt when she did not look her best, she felt guilty for doing university work and neglecting her appearance. Many of the women expressed high levels of shame at their bodies and felt that if they were unhappy with their appearance, they should actively work towards improving it.

'Bigger is better: Masculinity vs. Muscularity'

The men saw exercise as a means of achieving muscularity and saw muscularity as the ultimate construct of 'being a man', and felt at their most masculine during exercising. When describing the ideal body, males had a very clear image of how their bodies should be, and were clear to make distinctions between the body that they did, and definitely did not want. All seven men reported focusing only on their upper body - their arms and stomachs mainly - and many of them commented that they did not work on their legs at all. They

made associations with having a muscular upper physique with receiving more attention from the opposite sex and feeling more powerful, although strong contradictions existed in the constructs of masculinity (not trying too hard with appearance) and muscularity (exercising, which takes physical effort to achieve bigger muscles).

‘Shifting Goalposts for Perfection’

This theme refers to the self-objectifying nature of the gym and how this affected the exercise experience, particularly in the weight lifting environments that the males described. Almost all of the participants said that appearance had become more important to them since they had begun exercising. The presence of mirrors made participants scrutinise their bodies and critically evaluated what they felt should be better. Upward comparisons played a key role in how participants perceived their own bodies to be and satisfied they were. All of the participants that went to a gym said that found themselves comparing their bodies to others. Generally, participants said they compared themselves most to someone with similar qualities, such as body frame or body shape as them but someone who they perceived to have a better body than them. As a result, the participants’ appearance goals continued to shift.

‘The Emergence of Intrinsic Motivations for Exercising’

For two women who had started exercising for appearance related reasons and exercised outside of the fitness centre environment, they reported that new

motivations had emerged. For them, they appeared to exercise for intrinsic reasons rather than solely for their appearance. Similarly, even though many others increased their appearance related reasons for reasons, they also began to experience *other* reasons for participating in physical activity, such as health rewards and social benefits. This theme refers to how a change from exercising for the solely for the body, to exercising for the self, existed.

Conclusion

Participants expressed high motivations to change their size and weight, and had strong self-efficacy beliefs about being able to mould their physique to their ideal body type. This reflects the culturally ingrained belief that with sufficient effort and self-control, the 'perfect body' is attainable (Maguire & Mansfield, 1998). Consequently, their appearance motivations had a significant impact on the type of exercise they participated in. Clear differences existed in constructs of exercise in that the women felt obligated to exercise as they felt responsible for appearance which caused feelings of shame and guilt and the males, in contrast, saw exercise as a means of achieving muscularity, and saw muscularity as the ultimate construct of 'being a man'. These gender-specific constructs affected the exercise experiences for the participants and how they felt about themselves and their bodies.

This research highlights the importance of body control beliefs, and suggests certain fitness environments may not promote a focus on health but rather reinforce the construct of the malleable body, and therefore cause exercisers to scrutinise and evaluate their bodies more. Many of the participants expressed

that they had become *more* satisfied with their bodies to due physical changes (thus supporting studies reporting improvement to body image, such as Cash & Williams, 2001), however, for those that exercised in the fitness centre environment with the presence of mirrors and sources of upward comparisons all around them, appearance goals constantly shifted as they began to scrutinise their bodies more and place an increasing importance on appearance.

This research therefore supports the notion that fitness centres are self-objectifying in nature (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008) and consequently, future research needs to establish effective strategies for creating environments where exercisers can feel positive about being physically active, regardless of their shape and size (Greenleaf, McGreer & Parham (2006).

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