Sociocultural Influences on Women's Body Image

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Abstract

Studies of health practices should include consideration of factors stemming from social and cultural forces that play a role in determining body image. For example, a woman's attitude about body image is formed within her cultural environment and is the result of sociocultural experiences (Arena, 2003). Different cultures have varying degrees of influence on what are considered valued behaviors. Findings from a study by Weaver (2006) indicated how socially constructed differences toward appearance contribute toward "thinness" standards for women. Many women in American society are identified by their body type. This unrealistic standard of beauty has been further distorted in the mass media. Many believe that the emphasis placed on thinner body shapes as the ideal causes some women to develop eating disorders in an effort to become or remain thin (Elliot., 2006). Women may develop a poor self-image because they can never achieve what is believed to be the ideal body image. This may lead to many women subjecting themselves to yo-yo dieting which eventually may lead to constant weight loss and gain in their effort to achieve thinness. This process of weight gain and loss induces weight gain over time.

Influence of Age and Body Size

Fingeret (2004) studied sociocultural, feminist, and psychological influences on women's body dissatisfaction by examining the manner in which awareness and internalization of appearance standards, feminist ideology, and self-esteem affect body

dissatisfaction. Sociocultural influences were shown to have significant effects on body image. Self-esteem had a direct effect on body dissatisfaction. Clearly, societal pressure for a body shape that is not attainable by most women can have a negative effect on self-esteem as well as physical health. There is some evidence that this is especially true for younger women. In a study of adulthood predictors of health-promoting behavior in older women, Holahan (2004) reported that education, and perceived health in adulthood, recalled importance in adulthood of success in sports before the age of 12. Older women may be more positive about their bodies than younger women because they perceive fewer societal pressures associated with their bodies. Choate (2005) added that body dissatisfaction is prevalent among women and girls.

Saucier (2006) investigated aging women and how body image emphasized society's role in influencing their body perceptions. The findings concluded that women entering middle age become more conscious of the realization that they no longer conform to society's standards of youth and beauty and that this may lead to low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety. According to Bruening (2005), the key to successful promotion of exercise and health benefits among diverse groups of women is to include women of all body shapes. Bruening suggested that a woman does not have to conform to an ever-changing ideal body image portrayed by the media and fashion industry to be considered beautiful. The motivation for changing exercise habits is assumed to be related to the discrepancy between reality and the ideal image of oneself (Rowe, 2005).

Influence of Media Images

In the past there appeared to be an arguable case for a contrast between middle-class caucasian women's obsession with food versus a more accepting attitude toward women's appetites within many African American communities. This previous trend changed in certain

media portrayals in the nineties. For example, features on diet, exercise and body image problems have grown increasingly prominent in magazines aimed at African American women. This trend has led to many African American women having eating disorders such as bulimia (Swann, 2007). This reflects the cultural reality that for most women today- whatever their racial or ethnic identity free and easy relations with food are a relic of the past (Swann, 2007). Additionally, Swann explained that if we surveyed cultural attitudes toward women's appetites and body size there would be a variety of answers shaped by ethnic, national, historical, class and other factors.

In a study on young women who were exposed to ultra thin magazine models Clay (2005) found that self esteem declined substantially during middle adolescence. Clay proposed that the reason may be due to changes in body image which develops in the context of sociocultural factors. According to Clay the main sociocultural factor was the unrealistic media images of female beauty.

Another study on young girls ages 5-8 years reported that girls who looked at magazines aimed at adult women had greater dissatisfaction with their appearance. This particular study concluded that girls aged 5-8 years of age are already living in an appearance culture in which both peers and the media influence body image and dieting awareness (Dohnt, 2006). Girls as young as 6 years old have reported negative body images (Choate 2006).

Rowe (2005) conducted a study on women that measured self–ideal size perception. He found that the majority overestimated their body size on average one fourth larger than they really were. The findings in Rowe's study show that women may not actually see themselves as fat, but they base their evaluations of themselves with their own self-critical standards. Swann (2007) concluded that lack of self-esteem is the cause of women's body image problems. He stated that the better women feel about themselves, the less they tend to overestimate their size.

Bessenoff (2006) explored body image self-discrepancy as moderator and social comparison as mediator in the effects on women from thin-ideal images in the media.

This study reported that women with high levels of body image self-discrepancy were more likely to engage in social comparison from exposure to thin-ideal advertisements. She stated that these comparison processes tend to induce self-directed negative consequences. Unfortunately, study after study has shown that many women do not feel good about their bodies (Swann, 2007). In our American culture many women are "disordered" about issues of self-worth, self-entitlement, self-nourishment and comfort with their bodies.

<center>Distorted Body Image</center>

There are many women considered to be normal weight, with no eating disorders who look in the mirror and see their bodies as fat and ugly. Many of these women's distorted beliefs about their bodies can be traced to the fashion industry's portrayal of the ideal woman as very thin. The fashion industry tends to use models who are not indicative of the average woman. As a matter of fact, the average model used in the fashion industry weighs 25 percent less than the average woman (Mahan, 2004). This distortion can lead to women seeing their imperfect bodies as indicators of an imperfect person (Brownell, 2005). Socially and culturally, many women are taught that their looks will determine their success.

Some cultures state that a woman who is thin is the ideal woman accepted by society, while some cultures tend to believe that the ideal body type for a woman is not too thin. This type of pressure for women to try to achieve the impossible may lead to depression, eating disorders, and low self-esteem. Throughout the years, in many cultures, women have been the focus of beauty, not men. Women have had to read, listen and hear about what is considered to be beautiful. Unfortunately, for most women they do not fit into the prevalent category that is accepted as the norm for beautiful. This type of pressure can be overtly or inadvertently reinforced by their friends, family in the work environment and in the many magazines, books and television ads and shows that are shown daily.

Before and after advertisements are shown to be biased. In other words, they send a message to women that if you look like the before that your body type is not acceptable. These type of ads also tend to send an unrealistic message about how losing weight is a process, not an overnight cure. The ads do not focus on the many hours that the individual may have spent adjusting her diet and modifying her lifestyle through exercising. These ads send a message that losing weight is easy and that if you are similar to the before picture that you are lazy and fat.

Focus on Inner Vision

The ideal body image for women has shifted over the years. The waif (thin) look is currently the ideal look for many women in society (Kaminski, 2005). The sculpted look through plastic surgery has also become an acceptable look for women in society. The unattainable ideal image has led women to try diet pills, and may lead to eating disorders that are not easy to overcome (Kaminski, 2005). Women who are caught in the middle with a distorted image of their body may need to learn to get in touch with their body type. In other words, women may need to try to live outside of society's perceived notion of what is considered an acceptable, ideal body type for women. They need to have a positive acceptance of their particular type of body and appreciate the uniqueness of their bodies.

Brownell (2005) stated that it is hard to find a woman who likes her body. Brownell mentioned that women are changing the way they view their bodies. He suggested that instead of being horribly dissatisfied with their own bodies, women have become somewhat less horribly dissatisfied. Brownell (2005) mentioned that many women will find something wrong with their bodies. Brownell stated that if a woman likes her shape, she will usually find something wrong with her body such as her toes, knees elbows or ankles. Women need to focus on their inner vision which entails knowing what they want, and learning to express themselves through their thoughts and emotions. This may lead to their ability to accept their body types and not be engrossed in believing that they have to conform to the stereotyped women's body image portrayed by society, particularly the media.

Summary

Orbach (2005) stated that even as the media such as the movies, television and magazines has begun to promote images of normal-size or large women, the skinny-body ideal continues to exist. Orbach (2005) stated that the ideal of the skinny-body ideal is embedded in the average woman's psyche. The rail thin ideal body image has been passed down through generations. Burgard (2000) concluded that we are in our third generation of women who believe in the rail thin body as the ideal image. Burgard (2000) mentioned that there are patients now whose grandmothers were anorexic.

Many women are exposed to similar sociocultural pressures. As a result, can a cultural analysis account for the fact that some women develop a distorted view of their bodies while others do not? Why are some women more vulnerable than others? The feminist position on this subject involves positing of an identical cultural situation for all women instead of the description of ideological and institutional parameters that govern the construction of gender in our culture (Fingeret, 2004). Of course not all women are exposed to the same cultural environment. Rather, they are all exposed to homogenizing and normalizing images and ideologies concerning female beauty. Unfortunately, these images and ideologies press for conformity to dominant cultural norms. A woman's identity is not formed only through interactions with such images. The configurations (of ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, religion, genetics, education, age, etc.,) that make up each woman's life will also be factors in how each woman is affected by our culture.

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