

Promoting Positive Body Image in Males and Females: Contemporary Issues and Future Directions

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Abstract Research presented in this special issue focuses on a number of key contemporary themes relating to gendered body image. This paper considers what these studies tell us about the associations between body image and self-esteem, internalization of thin/muscular ideals, social comparison, and social identity and makes suggestions for interventions to improve body image in girls/women and boys/men. It is concluded that psycho-social interventions to reduce internalization, to make social comparison processes more realistic, to raise self-esteem and to enable people to question social identities related to body dissatisfaction may be useful short-term solutions to improving body image in males and females with negative images of their bodies. Since most evidence for effectiveness of these kinds of interventions has focused on women and girls, more work is needed on how to make these effective for men and boys.

Keywords Gendered body image · Body satisfaction · Internalization · Social comparison · Self esteem · Social identity

Introduction

This special issue presents contemporary international research investigating sociocultural, psychological, behavioral, and demographic factors related to body image in girls/women and boys/men. The collection of papers focused on a number of issues that contribute to our

understanding of the impact of gender on body image and also some of the key psychological factors that predict positive body image and related behaviors. What these studies tell us about the relationship between gender and body image is discussed here, along with some implications for improving body image in men/boys and women/girls.

Body image relates to a person's perceptions, feelings, and thoughts about his or her body and is usually conceptualized as incorporating body size estimation, evaluation of body attractiveness, and emotions associated with body shape and size (Grogan 2008). The construct has been operationalized in many different ways, including weight satisfaction, size perception accuracy, appearance satisfaction, body satisfaction, appearance evaluation, appearance orientation, body concern, drive for thinness, body esteem, body schema, and body percept (Thompson et al. 1999) and more recently as drive for muscularity (McCreary 2007). Studies in this special issue focus on the evaluative aspect of body image (body dissatisfaction), drive for muscularity, and affective aspects of body image (appearance anxiety and body shame). Authors have considered associations between body image and a number of psychological factors including self-esteem, internalization of the thin/muscular ideal, social comparison with idealized models, gender roles, self-surveillance, body size stereotyping, and social identity. They have conducted cross-sectional and longitudinal quantitative studies and qualitative work involving interviews and focus groups to investigate the impacts of these factors on body image. They have drawn on a wide range of available theories and models that emphasize intersectionality—or how gendered messages are associated with personal variables and social identities, including Social Comparison Theory (Festinger 1954), the Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al. 1999), Gender Role Intensification Theory (Hill and Lynch

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1987), Masculine Gender Role Conflict Theory (O’Neil 2008), and Objectification Theory (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). Authors have also considered some of the effects of body image on behavior, looking at muscle building, risky body change behaviors, eating, and eating pathology. Some general conclusions are drawn from these disparate studies here, focusing on implications for promoting positive body image among boys/men and girls/women.

It is important to promote positive body image because even relatively minor body concerns may lead to exercise avoidance in women (Choi 2000); use of anabolic steroids and other drugs to try to increase muscularity, particularly in men (Grogan et al. 2006; Pope et al. 2000); unhealthy eating behaviors, especially in women (including binge eating, restrictive dieting, and self-induced vomiting: Levine and Piran 2004; Stice and Shaw 2004); inability to quit smoking, particularly in women (Grogan et al. 2009; King et al. 2005); avoidance of self-examination for signs of skin cancer in women (Chait et al. 2009); and desire for cosmetic surgery with associated health risks in women (von Soest et al. 2006). By identifying factors that predict positive body image in girls/women and in boys/men, we may be able to produce effective interventions that are tailored so as to be appropriate for each gender. In so doing, we may be able to promote positive body image in boys/men and girls/women who are dissatisfied or anxious about their bodies, and in this way improve health and well-being for both genders.

Psychological Factors Predicting Positive Body Image

If positive body image is conceptualized as low negative body image and/or high body satisfaction, papers in this volume provide evidence that various psychological factors predict positive body image. Key recurrent themes are the importance of high self-esteem, low internalization of societal body ideals, low appearance comparison, and aspects of gender- and ethnicity-related social identity.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem has been linked to body image in previous work, with most studies suggesting that high self-esteem is associated with positive body image. In general, researchers have suggested that men and women with higher self-esteem also tend to evaluate their bodies more positively and are more satisfied with their bodies at all ages (e.g. Paxton et al. 2006; Tiggemann 2005; Wilcox 1997). In Choma et al.’s (2010) cross-sectional study, which used an Objectification Theory paradigm, appearance anxiety and body shame predicted self-esteem in Canadian undergrad-

uate students of both genders. The magnitude of the links between these two affective measures of body image and self-esteem was equivalent and did not differ by gender. Although (as the authors acknowledge) the cross-sectional nature of the study makes it impossible to understand fully the direction of this effect, the link between self-esteem and affective body image is clear in both men and women, thereby supporting suggestions by Tylka et al. (2005) that men’s self-esteem and body image are connected and countering suggestions that men’s body image is largely independent of their self-esteem (e.g. Ogden 1992).

In Petrie et al.’s (2010) work with US adolescents, self-esteem was a highly significant predictor of body satisfaction for girls and boys. Moreover, self-esteem was a better predictor for boys than any other physical or psycho-social variable entered in the analysis. This is an important finding since it demonstrates that the link between self-esteem and body image among adult men in Choma et al.’s (2010) study is also evident in adolescent boys. Thus, psychological interventions aimed at boys should focus on self-esteem in particular. Notably, temporal precedence is unknown due to the cross-sectional nature of this study.

The causal direction of the relationship between self-esteem and body image is a matter of debate, although most authors have suggested that body dissatisfaction predicts later self-esteem rather than vice versa, at least in adolescents (Paxton et al. 2006; Tiggemann 2005). Mellor et al. (2010) investigated the temporal effects of body dissatisfaction on self-esteem in older Australian adults, testing their 20-86-year-old male and female participants on measures of self-esteem and body dissatisfaction at two time points separated by 2 years. They found that high body dissatisfaction was related to low self-esteem in both men and women across all ages. High body dissatisfaction at the first time point predicted lower self-esteem 2 years later among women who were younger than 31-years-old. However, this temporal relationship was not found for men or older women. These findings suggest that the relationship between body dissatisfaction and self-esteem is influenced by both age and gender, which supports the intersectional approach to the study of gendered body image.

Although the direction of the relationship between body image and self-esteem has yet to be established, both affective and evaluative aspects of body image have been reliably associated with self-esteem in both men and women, as reported in this volume and elsewhere. Interventions to improve body image should capitalize on these associations, particularly for adolescent boys (Petrie et al. 2010). Research based in Australia and the United States has shown that programs designed to raise body esteem in male and female adolescents (O’Dea and Abraham 2000) and adults (Springer et al. 1999) can be

effective for improving body image. The idea behind these programs is that once self-esteem has improved, body image will also improve as a by-product of the self-esteem intervention. These programs also avoid having to address body concerns directly, which can be an advantage, particularly in preventative programs with younger children. O’Dea (2004) and Paxton (1993) have both argued that interventions that focus directly on body image have the potential to inadvertently raise body concerns in children who may not have considered body image problematic prior to the intervention. Although extant work from US and Australia has demonstrated positive results among children and adolescents (O’Dea 1995; O’Dea and Abraham 2000; Steese et al. 2006), more work is needed in this area to determine the effectiveness of programs that aim to build self-esteem and resilience as an indirect method of improving body image and to understand more fully how to make these programs optimally effective for both genders.

Internalization of the Thin/Muscular Ideal

A narrow range of acceptable body shapes are represented in the international media, and ideals are becoming more and more culturally homogeneous in the 21st century (Grogan 2008). For women in prosperous White western cultures, slimness is seen as a desirable attribute and is associated with self-control, elegance, social attractiveness, and youth (Bordo 2003). The ideal female body shape portrayed in mainstream White western media is slim but full-breasted (Overstreet et al. 2010); the body-type that Marchessault (2000) describes as “the physically impossible, tall, thin and busty Barbie-doll stereotype” (p. 204). Muscle tone is also important, and the 21st century ideal is a firm-looking, toned body for women as well as men (Bordo 2003), although visible muscles have not generally been considered gender appropriate for women (Choi 2000). Ideals for Black women in the US and other western cultures vary from the mainstream White ideal, tending to encompass a wider variety of acceptable body shapes (Wood-Barcalow et al. 2010) and idealizing a fuller figure for women (Duncan and Robinson 2004; Overstreet et al. 2010).

Historically, women’s bodies have been overrepresented in the media compared to men’s bodies, and descriptions of women tend to be more embodied than those of men (Bordo 2003). However, over the last two decades, the male body has become more visible in popular culture. There is a general consensus that most men aspire to a muscular mesomorphic shape characterized by an average build with well-developed muscles on the chest, arms and shoulders, and a slim waist and hips rather than an ectomorphic (thin) or endomorphic (fat) build (McCreary 2007). Harrison

Pope and colleagues in *The Adonis Complex* (2000) argued that men idealize the slender, muscled physique presented in popular Western media. Low body fat levels are a crucial part of this ideal physique as they allow muscles to be more visible (Cafri et al. 2005). Although moderate muscularity is rated most highly, extreme muscularity (such as that seen in competitive male body-builders) is not widely acceptable, being perceived as unnatural and as reflecting narcissism by many men (Grogan and Richards 2002). In sum, the Western cultural appearance ideal for men is generally slender and moderately muscular, without being over-muscled (Monaghan 2005).

Women and men who reject mainstream appearance ideals may be less sensitive to thin and/or muscular ideal media cues and less vulnerable to dissatisfaction caused by the consequent self-ideal discrepancies. The Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al. 1999) predicts that the impact of sociocultural influences on body dissatisfaction is mediated through internalization of an ideal body figure and social comparisons with those ideals. Some of the studies reported in this volume have shown the importance of the internalization of, and investment in, these socio-cultural ideals. For example, there is some evidence for the internalization of the thin ideal in US girls as young as 3-years-old. Harriger et al. (2010), using an ingenious game-piece choice methodology, found that 3-year-old girls display a preference for a ‘thin’ over a ‘fat’ game piece. These findings suggest that psychological interventions aimed at promoting positive body image in girls by challenging the thin ideal need to access girls as early as possible, ideally before they enter school.

Other patterns for the internalization of the thin ideal emerged from the research in this volume. Petrie et al. (2010) found that internalization did *not* predict body satisfaction in US adolescent girls, but body comparison was a significant predictor. In their paper, the authors suggested that body comparison may have emerged from the internalization of the thin ideal at this point in girls’ development. Further, internalization predicted eating pathology in Warren et al.’s (2010) study with adolescent Latina girls in the USA. In Hesse-Biber et al.’s (2010) study, Black female US participants reported complex relationships with mainstream White American body ideals. Although most Black women rejected the thin ‘White’ ideal, some women had dieted to try to match this ideal.

Internalization of the muscular ideal among male samples was also explored. Karazsia and Crowther (2010) sampled US male university students and found that internalization of the muscular ideal was a direct predictor of both muscularity dissatisfaction and risky body change behaviors. These findings suggest that internalization is also a predictor of body dissatisfaction in men, countering previous claims that this was the case only in women (e.g.

van den Berg et al. 2007). Pompper's (2010) US adult men were critical of the 'unrealistic' muscular and hairless body ideals for men in American media, but reported being in a bind by having to change the look of their bodies to match those of male models in order to attract women. Data from adolescent boys are less clear. In Smolak and Stein's (2010) sample of US adolescent boys, media investment positively correlated with drive for muscularity at two time points. Further, boys who were more invested in muscular ideals were also more likely to use muscle-building techniques. These findings support the role of internalization of the muscular ideal in predicting male body image concerns.

However, similar to the findings with adolescent girls, Petrie et al. (2010) found that internalization, when examined among various psychological and sociocultural variables, did *not* uniquely predict body satisfaction for US adolescent boys. In addition, Warren et al. (2010) found that internalization did not predict eating pathology in adolescent Latino boys in the USA. Clearly there is more work to be done in this area to understand more fully the role of internalization in determining adolescents' body image, and to understand more about the age when boys may become invested in the muscular ideal. Previous qualitative work has suggested that this happens before 8-years-old (Grogan and Richards 2002). Overall, research with adults shows a clear role for internalization of thin and/or muscular ideals in promoting body dissatisfaction.

Since internalization has been linked with eating pathology for girls (Warren et al. 2010), and risky body change behaviors for men (Karazsia and Crowther 2010), as well as muscle building in adolescent boys (Smolak and Stein 2010), it is important to find ways of reducing internalization of thin/muscular ideals in girls/women and boys/men. One popular approach to enable people to resist internalization of body ideals is to use psycho-educational interventions such as Media Literacy Training to teach people about unrealistic standards in western societies. Programs stress the cultural relativity of slenderness ideals, and usually involve explanations of the variety of photographic techniques such as airbrushing that can be used to 'perfect' pictures of models. Evidence for effectiveness of these programs with non-clinical groups has been mixed and based almost entirely on female participants. Although various authors have found that such programs are effective in reducing internalization of the thin ideal in women, most studies have not shown a significant reduction in body dissatisfaction (Levine and Smolak 2002).

Yet, there are exceptions. Levine and Smolak (2006) reported some success in improving body image using these programs with adolescent girls. Yamamiya et al. (2005) demonstrated that women high in internalization who receive psycho-educational media literacy information immediately prior to viewing idealized media images

subsequently report less weight concern compared to controls. Stice et al. (2006) revealed that programs where adolescent girls are asked to argue against the thin ideal (designed to induce cognitive dissonance) reduce thin-ideal internalization and subsequent eating problems. There is more work to be done in this area, particularly to enable men and boys to be more critical of muscular media images, as suggested by Smolak and Stein (2010). Harriger et al.'s (2010) research also suggests that it is important to implement these programs as early as possible to challenge thin-ideal internalization in girls before they reach school age.

Social Comparison

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger 1954) would predict that people use images projected by the media as standards for evaluating their own bodies. Previous work suggests that the effects of this upward social comparison process on body satisfaction are most significant if participants are encouraged to make overt comparisons between their own bodies and those of media models (Catterin et al. 2000). Some authors have suggested that men are less likely to make upward social comparisons with images of men's bodies than are women due to the fact that men's bodies have less sociocultural importance than women's (Wykes and Gunter 2005). Various scholars have argued that women's bodies are socially constructed as objects to be watched and evaluated, and that this is less the case for men (Bartky 1990; Bordo 2003; Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). However, studies that investigated the effects of viewing media images have shown that both men and women report decreased body satisfaction after viewing same-gender slender models (Grogan et al. 1996) and muscular models (Arbour and Martin-Ginis 2006), suggesting that men do make upward social comparisons with the bodies of other men under some circumstances.

There is good evidence from studies in this volume that girls and adult women make use of social comparisons when evaluating their bodies. Warren et al. (2010) found that adolescent Latina US girls made more social comparisons to media models than Latino boys, and that girls who scored higher on social comparison tendency also had greater eating pathology. As mentioned earlier, Petrie et al. (2010) found that social body comparison was a highly significant predictor of body satisfaction in US girls. Anschutz and Engels (2010) investigated the tendency to make social comparisons with the bodies of dolls among a sample of 6-to-10-year-old Dutch girls. Specifically, these researchers investigated the impact of playing with thin dolls such as Barbie compared to playing with a more realistic-sized doll on girls consumption of sweet snacks. Girls in the realistic-sized doll condition ate significantly

more than those in the thin doll condition, which the authors explain may be due to the relaxed dietary restraint fostered by the proportions of the realistic-sized doll. This study further develops our understanding of how exposure to real-life environmental cues that relate to body size can impact girls' eating.

It is noteworthy that around half of these girls in the study by Anschutz and Engels (2010) reported that they wanted to be thin, which supports Harriger et al.'s (2010) suggestion that girls may internalize the thin cultural ideal at a very young age. Future research that includes other body image scales (the body esteem scale used here showed quite low reliability with this sample) is needed to develop and understand more fully this effect and its link with body image. In a study with adult men and women, Boroughs et al. (2010) found that US women endorsed more symptoms of body dysmorphic disorder than men, and that sexuality and racial identification also impacted the symptoms reported. Importantly, appearance comparison was one of the strongest predictors of symptoms in adult women, and a better predictor than other factors such as self-esteem, suggesting that women experiencing these symptoms should be trained to regulate and reduce their frequency of body comparison.

Petrie et al. (2010) found that social body comparison did not uniquely predict body satisfaction in US adolescent boys. However, other work has shown that adolescent boys do engage in social comparison in relation to their bodies, and that this is associated with negative body image and related behaviors. Smolak and Stein (2010) found that social body comparison in US adolescent boys predicted media investment and muscle building behaviors, and Warren et al. (2010) found that social body comparison was associated with eating pathology for US adolescent Latino boys. This supports previous work where boys made explicit upward comparisons of their bodies with those of their friends as early as 8-years-old (Grogan and Richards 2002). Investigating adult US men, Boroughs et al. (2010) found that appearance comparison was one of the strongest predictors of body dysmorphic disorder symptoms, suggesting that men need to be discouraged from making these kinds of comparisons. Karazsia and Crowther (2010), in a sample of adult US men, suggest that social comparisons influence body dissatisfaction indirectly through internalization. This indirect path, where internalization acts as a mediator between appearance comparison and body dissatisfaction, is consistent with suggestions from Social Comparison Theory and previous work on adolescent girls (Shroff and Thompson 2006). Overall, the research suggests that adult men may learn about their body ideals through evaluating the bodies of other men.

Social comparisons involve some degree of self-objectification, or the chronic viewing of the self as an

appearance object (Tylka and Sabik 2010). Newheiser et al. (2010) demonstrated that gender is crucial for determining the impact of self-objectification on negative emotional experiences. In multiple studies they found that US men and women experience self-objectification differently, and that women may be more likely than men to understand the negative impacts of objectification on a target. However, both men and women reported negative emotions when asked to identify with a person being sexually objectified, showing that men can be taught to empathize with how women may feel when they are sexually objectified. Because social comparison between women often occurs in the context of gaining male attention, interventions to reduce social comparison aimed at men and women need to take into account these gender differences in response to being objectified and being the objectifier. Social comparison is associated with body image in men and women from adolescence onwards, and it predicts eating behavior, eating pathology, muscle building, and symptoms of body dysmorphic disorder. One approach that has enabled people to reduce the frequency of unrealistic comparisons and rethink unrealistic body standards is cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT interventions have been reported to be extremely effective in promoting positive body image in non-clinical populations (Cash and Hrabosky 2004; Cash and Strachan 2002). Reviews of the characteristics and effectiveness of body image interventions have concluded that CBT can be highly effective for producing long-term changes in body image (Jarry and Berardi 2004; Jarry and Ip 2005). However, as with interventions to reduce internalization, most research has been carried out with women. Therefore, more research needs to be conducted with men to investigate how best to encourage men and boys to rethink unrealistic comparisons with muscular models and reduce unhealthy behaviors in response to upward social comparisons.

Gender Roles and Social Identity

Social identity, and particularly identification with traditional female or male gender roles, has been linked to body image for both men and women (Dionne et al. 1995). This has led some researchers to assume an intersectional approach to gendered body image by focusing on social identity as an influential factor. In this volume, Smolak and Stein showed that gender role intensification predicts media investment in the muscular ideal for adolescent boys. Those boys who reported greater investment in male physical attributes (such as being good at sports, being able to lift heavy things) were more likely to be invested in media ideals of muscularity at the second time point, and they were also more likely to use muscle building techniques compared to those boys who were less invested in

masculinity. Smolak and Stein suggest that new strategies need to be developed to encourage boys to find other definitions of masculinity in order to avoid harmful muscle-building techniques, which may lead to later health problems.

Pompper (2010) also investigates the links between masculinity and body image, demonstrating that US adult men have complex and multi-faceted constructions of masculinity which are influenced by ethnicity and that interact in unexpected ways with body image. For most men ‘masculinity’ was defined in non-physical terms, suggesting broad constructions of what it means to be a man. Men reported confusion and frustration because they failed to match up with media ideals of how men’s bodies should look. Choma et al.’s (2010) cross-sectional study with Canadian college students also considered gender roles, and they found that masculinity attenuated body shame and anxiety in relation to appearance. Those men and women who endorsed items related to agency and self-confidence seemed more able to resist social pressures to look a particular way. For women, those who endorsed more feminine gender roles reported less body shame. This result conflicts with findings from other work (Dionne et al. 1995) and requires further research to more fully understand the connection between gender roles and body image.

Hesse-Biber et al. (2010) investigated the impact of racial identity on body image in US adult Black women. The women presented a wide range of ideal body types, but women who identified with White mainstream culture were most dissatisfied with their bodies. The authors challenged suggestions that Black women are necessarily protected from White social norms related to body ideals, as clearly there was a large degree of variability in women’s identities and experiences. This work is informative in showing the importance of considering social group identity when planning interventions to promote positive body image rather than assuming that demographic factors, such as ethnicity (or gender), have a uniform effect on body image.. Moreover, it supports the use of an intersectional framework in the study of gendered body image.

There is some evidence that intervention programs that enable people to reconsider their social identity can be effective, at least in women. Peterson et al. (2006) showed that women’s body satisfaction could be increased through promoting a feminist identity. The authors suggest that a feminist identity may operate as a buffer through which societal messages may be filtered to enable women to resist internalization of the thin ideal. This study suggests that exposure to feminist theories may serve as an effective intervention to improve body image in adult women.

This work is interesting, but we need to know much more about how to use these findings to develop effective interventions in this area, and in particular how to make

these effective for boys and men. Pompper (2010) and Smolak and Stein (2010) present useful pointers for how it might be possible to develop effective interventions relating to gender roles that would be appropriate for adult men and adolescent boys.

Summary

Papers presented in this second special issue on gendered body image have investigated body image in men, women, and children using a wide variety of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The qualitative and intersectional work reported in this volume (Hesse-Biber et al. 2010; Pompper 2010) presents a convincing case for some of the complexities inherent in being an embodied adult woman or man and details the associations between social identity and body image. The two longitudinal studies (Mellor et al. 2010; Smolak and Stein 2010) allow some insight into the temporal direction of the relationship between self-esteem and gendered body image, and more longitudinal work in this area will be useful in determining temporal ordering of variables in body image studies. Correlational studies clearly cannot be interpreted in terms of direction of effects. Future work using longitudinal and intervention studies will add further to our understanding of the interesting relationships shown here.

Several theoretical perspectives were validated in these papers for predicting positive body image, including Social Comparison Theory and the Tripartite Influence Model (Karazsia and Crowther 2010), Gender Role Intensification Theory (Smolak and Stein 2010) Masculine Gender Role Conflict Theory (Pompper 2010) and Objectification Theory (Choma et al.; Mellor et al. 2010). All authors have indicated how their data extend our understanding of the theories they are testing, and there are some particularly interesting suggestions from those working within an Objectification Theory paradigm. Traditionally, women’s bodies have been objectified more than those of men, but Mellor et al. (2010) and Choma et al. (2010) suggest that recent cultural changes in the objectification of the male body (Pope et al. 2000) are starting to impact on men’s experiences of embodiment; thus Objectification Theory may be applicable to men as well as women. Although women were generally more dissatisfied than men, some men were dissatisfied with their bodies. A total of 35% of men in Mellor et al.’s study scored at the dissatisfied end of the scale, and Pompper (2010) suggests that many men had experienced being objectified by women. Obviously, it cannot be in the interest of women if cultural objectification of the body is expanded to include men’s bodies as well as women’s, and objectification of the body needs to be challenged whether the targets are women or men.

Newheiser et al. (2010) have shown that techniques such as imagining oneself in the position of sexually objectified targets may facilitate understanding of some of the negative effects of being objectified and may thereby reduce objectification, particularly of women by men. Women tend to be more aware of negative impacts of objectification but could also benefit from this kind of training.

Papers in this special issue have shown that higher self-esteem, less internalization of thin/muscular ideals, and fewer social comparisons all predict greater positive body image in men and women, although the role of internalization in adolescents is not clear at present. Social identity is also important in determining body image, and women and men who identified with groups which subscribed to a broader range of body-related norms were more satisfied than those who had internalized a narrower and less realistic set of ideals. A recurrent theme is the importance of gender in determining body satisfaction. In studies where body image was compared between men and women using gender-appropriate measures, girls and women of all ages were significantly less satisfied than males (Boroughs et al. 2010; Mellor et al. 2010), had significantly higher body shame and appearance anxiety (Choma et al. 2010), and endorsed more symptoms of body dysmorphic disorder than men (Boroughs et al. 2010). Women also reported greater use of social comparison (Boroughs et al. 2010; Petrie et al. 2010; Warren et al. 2010) and more internalization (Petrie et al. 2010; Warren et al. 2010) than men. Girls and women were more invested in social beauty norms. Body image interventions need to address this gender imbalance as a matter of urgency. Psycho-social interventions with individuals to reduce internalization of the thin/muscular ideal, to make social comparison processes more realistic, to raise self-esteem, and to enable people to question social identities that relate to body dissatisfaction are short-term solutions to the challenge of how to improve body image in men and women. Research presented in this special issue supports the development of interventions in all these areas. Long-term solutions to negative body image will involve a reduction in cultural objectification of the body and a shift in body aesthetics to encompass a greater variety of acceptable body shapes and sizes. Psychologists are well-placed to challenge existing gendered norms on how bodies should look, and need to get involved in supporting policy initiatives that challenge the use of unrealistic images in the media (such as airbrushing and use of very thin female models in advertisements for instance) as well as the underlying cultural messages supported by such gendered images.

To advance this research and strengthen clinical insight and intervention, it is necessary to move beyond defining and conceptualizing positive body image as simply low

levels of negative body image or narrowly defining it as body satisfaction (Wood-Barcalow et al. 2010). Positive body image contains many characteristics that need to be explored in conjunction with gendered messages about the body as well as psychological and social identity variables for women and men of all ages. This article serves as a call for researchers and practitioners to commit to exploring predictors and consequents of all dimensions of positive body image.

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