



Exploring the effect of external shame on body appreciation among Portuguese young adults: The role of self-compassion



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ABSTRACT

Studies on body image-related disturbances have recently embraced a fresh and innovative construct: body appreciation. Body appreciation, an aspect of positive body image, defines as the detention of a balanced, affectionate and health-conscious relationship with one's own body's features. Its exploration is considered to be essential to the success of upcoming prevention and intervention programs in the area of body image and eating disorders. The role of shame, although widely studied in negative body image and eating psychopathology, is yet unknown regarding body appreciation. In this line, a main goal of this study was to explore the effect of external shame on body appreciation in a sample of Portuguese young adults. Also, taking into account the similarities between body appreciation and self-compassion, and since self-compassion is known as a powerful tool against the impact of shame on body image-related disturbances, this study also intended to test the role of self-compassion in the relationship between external shame and body appreciation.

Results revealed body mass index and external shame as negative correlates, and self-compassion as a positive correlate of body appreciation. Also, path analysis showed that external shame holds a significant effect on body appreciation, both directly and indirectly. Specifically, this analysis revealed that self-compassion acts as a mediator between shame and body appreciation.

Present findings seem to support the pertinence of programs to promote an affectionate and healthy relationship with one's own body image, which may benefit from the target of shame and the inclusion of self-compassion practices.

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1. Introduction

It is unquestionable that research on body image has a rich history, of almost one hundred years (e.g., Cash, 2004). Over time, scientific research has gathered valuable knowledge on body image correlates, predictors and consequences, being almost entirely focused on pathology, i.e., mostly designed to understand negative body image (Smolak & Cash, 2011; Tylka, 2012). This approach to body image, although allowing the creation of successful therapeutic methods to alleviate symptoms of negative body image (Smolak & Cash, 2011), may have led to the neglect of the study of ways to promote positive body image, and thus have compromised the development of more effective body image-related prevention and treatment programs (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). In this line, current approaches recommend a greater investment on adaptive and healthy body image, as being vital to upcoming research on the field (Smolak & Cash, 2011). This investment may be crucial to the prevention and therapeutics of body image disturbances, helping healthy individuals and patients to respect,

enjoy, and honor their bodies, which may largely contribute to the effectiveness and maintenance of therapeutic gains (Smolak & Cash, 2011; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b).

The emergent and innovative construct of positive body image is indeed distinct from negative body image (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). Body appreciation, an aspect of positive body image, does not correspond to the contrary of body image dissatisfaction (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). Instead, body appreciation implicates an attitude of acceptance, love, and protection toward all body's features, functionality, and health (Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005), regardless of the experience of a certain and normative degree of body dissatisfaction (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). Moreover, encouraging body appreciation implicates an adaptive investment in appearance, that is the systematic engagement in self-care behaviors, which enriches one's natural features, without being moved by the need to comply with external standards of beauty, or threatening one's balance and health (Cook-Cottone, 2015; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). This adaptive and holistic relationship with the body also includes the rejection of societally prescribed malign ideals of beauty, and thus the capacity of filtering information in a body protective manner (Tylka & Augustus Horvath, 2010; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b).

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Shame is a very powerful self-conscious emotion which emerges from the experience of being seen by others as flawed, inferior, inadequate, or powerless (e.g., Tangney & Dearing, 2002). This socially contextualized emotion is defined as external shame, that is the unsafe perception that others view one's own inner self and outer body's features as negative, which may lead to being ignored, criticized or rejected by others (e.g., Goss, Gilbert, & Allan, 1994). According to Gilbert (2002), these negative evaluations about how one thinks others see the self can be internalized. In this line, internal shame refers to when feelings and negative judgments become self-directed, i.e., when one starts to view him/herself in a devaluing manner. Although shame is a universal experience which holds a relevant defensive function due to its capacity of signaling interpersonal danger (e.g., the possibility that others perceive one's own unattractiveness, powerlessness and undesirableness; Gilbert, 2003), experiencing high levels of shame has been associated with different mental health conditions, namely eating disorders (Goss & Gilbert, 2002; Pinto-Gouveia, Ferreira, & Duarte, 2014; Troop & Redshaw, 2012). Indeed, although shame experiences are not necessarily related to body image, this emotion has been regarded as central in eating psychopathology (Gee & Troop, 2003; Mustapic, Marcinko, & Vargek, 2015). Regarding the association of shame with positive body image variables, namely body appreciation, a recent study showed that feelings of inferiority in social comparisons and low appearance-related self-worth are associated with lower body appreciation (Homan & Tylka, 2015). In fact, these feelings of inferiority and low self-worth can be conceptualized as internal shame domains (i.e., the translation of a negative self-evaluative style, and of the presence of feelings of inferiority and devaluation; Gilbert, 2002). Nevertheless, external shame is yet unexplored in association with body appreciation.

The association between self-compassion and positive body image dates back to one of the roots of positive body image: Buddhism (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). This Asian philosophy highlights the role of mindfulness abilities when dealing with internal experiences, and is thought to be related with an appreciative and balanced relationship with one's own body via psychological flexibility (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999) and self-compassion (Neff, 2003). Specifically, the cultivation of self-compassion not only includes the practice of mindful attitudes toward internal experiences, but also the capability of being kind to oneself in times of suffering, and perceiving pain as a common experience shared among the human condition (Neff, 2003). Thus, as positive body image and its body appreciation aspect can be regarded as the detention of a compassionate attitude toward one's own body image (i.e., the ability to be kind and understanding to perceived flaws in appearance, and to recognize them as shared by all) and the association between body appreciation and self-compassion has indeed been covered by recent research (Homan & Tylka, 2015; Kelly & Stephen, 2016; Marta-Simões, Mendes, Oliveira, Trindade, & Ferreira, 2016; Wasylkiw, MacKinnon, & MacLellan, 2012). Specifically, a recent study by Homan and Tylka (2015) highlighted the emotion regulation role of self-compassion, by reporting that self-compassion acts as an enhancer of body appreciation in the presence of body image-related threats. In addition, Kelly, Vimalakanthan, and Miller (2014) have reported that higher levels of self-compassion are associated with a lower impact of body mass index on the levels of body image flexibility (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). Although self-compassion is not yet widely studied in relation to positive body image variables, its positive effects on negative body image-related disturbances are widely explored, namely the relationship between higher self-compassion and a lower impact of body image dissatisfaction on the overall well-being and health (Duarte, Ferreira, Trindade, & Pinto-Gouveia, 2015), and also a lower likelihood of being driven by the pursuit of thinness and engaging in disordered eating attitudes and behaviors (Pinto-Gouveia, Ferreira, & Duarte, 2013). Self-compassion has also been referred by several studies as an efficient tool against shame (Ferreira, Matos, Duarte, & Pinto-Gouveia, 2014; Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Neff, 2011). Specifically,

a study by Daye, Webb, and Jafari (2014) found that self-compassion can attenuate both body shame and body surveillance.

Taking together previous data on the valuable role of cultivating a more appreciative, compassionate and protective relationship with one's own body image (e.g., Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010) and inner self (e.g., Neff, 2003), and also the relevance of investing in the study of mechanisms to promote positive body image, this study intended to reach a greater clarification of this emerging construct by exploring the relationship between body appreciation and central variables in the study of eating psychopathology, namely body mass index, shame, and self-compassion. Furthermore, the major aim of this study was to examine the role of self-compassion in the association between external shame and body appreciation. Specifically, we aimed at testing the adequacy of a model which hypothesizes that the tendency to treat oneself kindly, with care, and in a more understanding manner, acts as a mediator of the aforementioned relationship, on a sample of young male and female adults. Although some emotion regulation mechanisms are already explored in relation to body appreciation, specifically self-compassion (Homan & Tylka, 2015; Kelly & Stephen, 2016) and body image flexibility (Webb, Butler-Ajibade, & Robinson, 2014; Webb, 2015), the hypothetical linking role of self-compassion in the association between external shame and body appreciation was yet unexplored. Additionally, the present study aimed at analyzing sex differences on the associations established between the variables in study. For a long time, body image appeared to be more important to women, i.e., women tended to use it more as a preferable dimension to evaluate themselves and others (Goss & Gilbert, 2002). However, recent literature has been showing that body image may be either important to men (e.g., Griffiths et al., 2016) and that the prevalence of body image-related disturbances in males is significantly growing (e.g., Strother, Lemberg, Stanford, & Turberville, 2012), which may justify an investment on the study of the correlates of body appreciation among men.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The present study comprised 155 participants, 44 males and 111 females. Participants' ages ranged between 18 and 35, with males and females' mean ages presenting significant differences, but of small size effect, as indicated by Cohen's d value ($t_{(153)} = 2.20$; $p = 0.03$; $d = 0.36$). Specifically, males' mean age ($M = 22.36$; $SD = 3.14$) was slightly higher than women's mean age ($M = 21.30$; $SD = 2.54$). The sample presented a mean of years of schooling of 13.69 ($SD = 1.63$), which did not differ significantly between males and females ($t_{(153)} = -0.81$; $p = 0.42$). Concerning body mass index (BMI), participants reported a mean of 22.63 ($SD = 3.57$), which corresponds to a normal-weighted sample (WHO, 1995). Participants' BMI means were different between men ($M = 23.54$; $SD = 3.14$) and women ($M = 22.28$; $SD = 2.99$). Nevertheless, this difference was of small magnitude ($t_{(153)} = 2.30$; $p = 0.02$; $d = 0.37$), and reflects the BMI distribution by sex of the Portuguese population (Poínhos et al., 2009).

2.2. Procedure

This study is part of a wider research about body image and mental health in the Portuguese population. In order to achieve a heterogeneous sample in relation to characteristics such as socioeconomic status, sex, and level of education, participants were recruited from distinct institutions, namely one private company, one retail service, and one higher education institutions. These institutions' review boards provided their approval and were assured that all ethical requirements would be respected by the research team. Participants were fully informed about the study's nature and purposes, namely the voluntary character of their participation and data's confidentiality. After obtaining written

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