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Illustrating the body: Cross-sectional and prospective investigations of the impact of life drawing sessions on body image

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ABSTRACT

Life drawing sessions, where individuals produce drawings of the human figure from observations of a live model, may contain embodying elements that promote healthier body image. Two pilot studies were conducted to test this hypothesis. In Study 1, 138 individuals recruited from life drawing sessions in London, UK, estimated how many sessions they had attended in their lifetime and completed measures of negative and positive body image. In women, greater attendance was significantly associated with higher body appreciation and lower drive for thinness and social physique anxiety. In men, greater attendance was significantly associated with higher body appreciation, but not drive for muscularity or social physique anxiety. In Study 2, 37 women took part in a life drawing session for the first time. Compared to pre-session scores, participants had significantly more positive state body image and appearance satisfaction after the session. The findings of these studies suggest that life drawing may promote healthier body image, particularly among women, but further research is needed.

1. Introduction

Body image refers to the "multifaceted psychological experiment of embodiment" and encompasses one's "body-related self-perceptions and self-attitudes, including thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors" (Cash, 2004, p. 1). Sociocultural models currently provide the best explanatory framework for understanding the widespread occurrence of negative body image in women (e.g., Stice, 1994; Thompson et al., 1999) and men (e.g., Tylka, 2011). According to these models, negative body image is partially the result of pressure individuals experience to achieve unrealistic beauty ideals – a thin ideal in the case of women (Striegel-Moore et al., 1986) and a muscular ideal in the case of men (McCreary and Sasse, 2000). To the extent that individuals internalise these pressures and ideals, it is likely to result in adverse effects in terms of body image and, more distally, disordered eating outcomes (i.e., psychological conditions evidenced by disordered food- and body-related cognitions, poor self-regulation, and dysfunctional eating behaviours). Not surprisingly, scholars have used these sociocultural models as a basis for identifying putative risk and protective factors for negative body image and disordered eating.

One such protective factor is participation in embodying activities, through which individuals gain a sense of ownership over their physical selves and experience their bodies as deserving of respect (Menzel and Levine, 2011). As articulated by Piran (2001, 2002), embodying activities are situated in the body and result in a sense of flow and empowerment, which in turn helps promote healthier body image. Furthermore, embodying activities afford individuals the space and tools to effectively negotiate objectifying experiences and to better cope with threats to body image (Menzel and Levine, 2011). Based on this empowerment-relational model (Piran, 2002), scholars have identified a number of activities that have embodying elements, such as participation in athletic sports (Swami et al., 2009) and dance (Swami and Tovée, 2009; Swami and Harris, 2012).

Although the positive effects of embodying activities are usually assumed to occur through direct experiences (e.g., participating in dance, rather than observing dance), it is also possible that they may occur more vicariously. Life drawing sessions, where individuals produce drawings of the human figure from observations of a live model (Phillips, 2006), is one such activity where embodying elements may not be experienced directly. Rather, the process of observing – and receiving sensory feedback from – a naked, living human body and the practice of reproducing that body, through active experimentation (cf. Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi, 1976), in drawing media may contain elements that promote embodying experiences in the artist. In addition, life drawing may provide a safe space for individuals to explore relationships with their own bodies and issues of aesthetics, particularly the

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normativity of beauty ideals (Mayhew, 2010). Taken together, these processes suggest that life drawing sessions may contain elements that promote embodiment and, in turn, healthier body image. To date, however, direct explorations of this assumption remain piecemeal.

In one qualitative study, Stanhope (2013) focused on 20 female art and design students from London, aged between 15 and 16 years. Based on interviews following, and written observations during, a life drawing class, Stanhope concluded that life drawing may offer girls an opportunity to reflect on gendered issues related to appearance and body image. Although adolescents may struggle to move beyond the nakedness of the model, which itself may be associated with body anxieties, life drawing sessions could help to challenge unrealistic beauty ideals through the presentation of natural human forms. Likewise, in her case report of an undergraduate female painting student, Chittenden (2013) showed how life drawing, as part of a fine art degree course, afforded a space in which to frame enactments of aesthetic identity. As an individual who felt marginalised and excluded from representations of the female form in mainstream media, the student was able to use her degree course to examine how she felt about her own body and to develop body confidence. Other studies have evaluated the effects of attending life drawing sessions among medical students (e.g., Finn et al., 2011; Phillips, 2000), finding that such sessions provide an insight into cultural stereotypes of beauty, nakedness, and sexuality, which in turn foster greater appreciation for corporeal experiences and feelings (Collett and McLachlan, 2005).

Our knowledge of the effects of attending life drawing sessions on body image would be greatly enhanced through direct, quantitative research. Here, I report on two pilot studies investigating the effects of taking part in life drawing sessions on body image. In Study 1, I used a cross-sectional design to examine associations between the number of life drawing sessions that women and men had attended and measures of negative body image (i.e., drive for thinness in women and drive for muscularity in men, as well as social physique anxiety) and positive body image (i.e., body appreciation). While negative and positive body image, as measured in the present study, are not necessarily polar opposites (Swami and Chamorro-Premuzic, 2008; Tylka and Wood-Barcalow, 2015), they offer an opportunity to tap multiple dimensions of body image. I predicted that greater attendance at life drawing sessions would be associated with lower social physique anxiety, lower drive for thinness/muscularity, and higher body appreciation. In Study 2, I used a prospective design to examine the effects of attending a life drawing session on women's state body image. I predicted that, compared to state body image prior to the session, women would show healthier state body image after the life drawing session.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

The participants of Study 1 were 75 women and 63 men, the majority of whom were of European White ancestry (73.2%). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 76 years ($M=38.57$, $SD=16.00$).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Life drawing attendance

Participants were asked to estimate the total number of life drawing sessions they had attended in their lifetime.

2.2.2. Drive for thinness

Women completed the 7-item Drive for Thinness subscale of the Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI-3-DT; Garner, 2004), a self-report measure of preoccupation with body weight, intense fear of becoming fat, and excessive concern with dieting. Items were rated on a 6-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 6 (*Always*). Higher scores on this scale reflect greater drive for thinness. This subscale of the EDI-3 has good patterns of validity and satisfactory evidence of internal consistency (Garner, 2004). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.90.

2.2.3. Drive for muscularity

Men were asked to complete the 15-item Drive for Muscularity Scale (DMS; McCreary and Sasse, 2000), a measure of an individual's desire to have a more muscular body. Items were rated on a 6-point scale (1=*Always*, 6=*Never*) and scores were reverse-coded prior to analysis so that higher scores represent greater drive for muscularity. DMS scores have been reported to have good patterns of validity and reliability (McCreary and Sasse, 2000). Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.84.

2.2.4. Positive body image

Participants completed the 10-item Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2; Tylka and Wood-Barcalow, 2015), a measure of body acceptance, bodily respect, and a protective cognitive style that rejects unrealistic ideals. All items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*), with higher scores reflecting greater body appreciation. Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015) have shown that the BAS-2 has a one-dimensional factor structure in women and men, as well as good psychometric properties. In the present study, Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.88 for women and 0.90 for men.

2.2.5. Social physique anxiety

Participants completed the 12-item Social Physique Anxiety Scale (SPAS; Hart et al., 1989), a measure of anxiety associated with perceived evaluations of one's body or physical appearance. Items were rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Not at all like me*) to 5 (*Like me a lot*), with higher scores indicating greater social physique anxiety. SPAS scores are one-dimensional and have been shown to have adequate construct validity, internal consistency, and test–retest reliability (Hart et al., 1989). In the present study, Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.86 for women and 0.87 for men.

2.3. Procedures

Two research assistants visited independently-organised life drawing sessions in London, UK, between January and May 2015. Before the start of each session, the research assistants sought permission from the organiser before soliciting participation from attendants for a research project on the relationship between art and well-being. If participation was agreed, individuals were asked to provide written informed consent before being provided with a double-sided questionnaire in which the order of presentation of the above scales was pre-randomised and in which a request for basic demographics appeared at the end. To avoid repeated entries by the same individual, participants were asked to provide a unique code consisting of their date of birth, their mothers' maiden initials, and the location of the venue (all codes were destroyed prior to analyses and the rest of the questionnaire was anonymous). A total of 200 invitations were made, representing a response rate of 69.0%. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire before the session began and to return completed questionnaires to the research assistants in a sealed envelope. Participation was voluntary and participants were not remunerated. All participants were provided with a debrief sheet, which contained further information about the project and the contact information of the author.