



Development and exploration of the gratitude model of body appreciation in women

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ABSTRACT

Although researchers and clinicians recognize the importance of positive body image for women's well-being, development of theoretical frameworks for understanding positive body image has not kept pace with research documenting its many benefits. The present study proposed and tested a comprehensive model linking gratitude, contingent self-worth, social comparison, body appreciation, and intuitive eating. Path analysis indicated that this model fit the data for a sample of college and online community women ($N = 263$). Gratitude was indirectly linked to body appreciation via lower investment in self-worth based on appearance and others' approval, and via lower engagement in eating and body comparison. Gratitude had a strong direct effect on body appreciation, and body appreciation accounted for a large portion (88%) of gratitude's relationship with intuitive eating. These results provide strong preliminary support for the model, revealing that gratitude, which can be improved via intervention, plays a key role in body appreciation.

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, there has been a surge of interest in women's positive body image, as researchers have recognized that healthy body image consists of more than the absence of problematic attitudes and behaviors (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). However, development of theoretical frameworks for understanding positive body image has lagged behind studies documenting its many benefits. An important exception is the *acceptance model of intuitive eating*, a model that is rooted in humanistic and objectification theories, and centers on the development of positive body image (Avalos & Tylka, 2006). A central premise of the model is that unconditional body acceptance by others helps to loosen women's concern about meeting societal appearance ideals, and directs their attention away from their outward appearance and toward the way their bodies feel and function. While substantial empirical support for this model has accumulated (see Tylka, 2017), other relevant positive psychological traits have not been considered within models of positive body image.

Gratitude, or the tendency to notice and be thankful for the positive aspects of life (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010), is a trait that may offer benefits for positive body image. Recent work has established that gratitude has robust associations with both emotional and physical well-being, and has potential for promoting positive functioning and psychological strengths (Wood et al., 2010). Consistent with the call for research that seeks to understand and nurture psychological flourishing (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006), it is important to explore how gratitude might contribute to healthy and affirming attitudes toward the body. Using the acceptance model as a guiding framework, the present study tested a path model that included gratitude, positive body image, and potential mediators of the relationship between these constructs.

1.1. The acceptance model of intuitive eating

The acceptance model addresses the development of two key constructs that represent positive, embodied, and adaptive alternatives to dysfunctional body-related attitudes and behaviors: body appreciation and intuitive eating. Body appreciation is defined as accepting, favorably evaluating, and caring for the body, while also rejecting narrowly-defined cultural ideals as the only definition of beauty (Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005). Body appreciation is distinct from low levels of dysfunctional body attitudes

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(Avalos et al., 2005; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a) and is positively linked with a substantial repertoire of desirable psychological characteristics (for a review, see Tylka, 2017). Body appreciation has been found to predict future levels of intuitive eating (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2016), which is defined as a flexible pattern of eating largely in response to internal hunger and satiety cues rather than in response to emotional or situational cues (Tylka, 2006; Tylka et al., 2015). Intuitive eating also involves freedom to choose foods based on their appeal and their value in meeting bodily needs rather than based on strict rules about “good” or “forbidden” foods. Research has shown that intuitive eating is inversely related to disordered eating symptomatology, and positively related to a variety of markers of psychological and physical well-being (Katzer et al., 2008; Linardon & Mitchell, 2017; Tylka, 2006; Tylka et al., 2015), illustrating that intuitive eating is a behavioral extension of positive body image, that is, taking care of the body by listening to its needs and feeding it well.

The theoretical foundation for the acceptance model derives from humanistic theory and objectification theory. According to humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers, people have an inherent tendency toward growth, fulfillment, and maximizing their own unique ‘human beingness’ (Rogers, 1961). However, this *actualizing tendency* is constrained by the individual’s strong and pervasive need for positive regard from others. When this need is satisfied by significant others, the individual is unencumbered by external conditions of worth, and can flourish. But when people do not receive ready and consistent unconditional positive regard from others, they will seek to think, feel, and behave in ways that will earn the love and respect of others. According to objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), most women perceive that the way to achieve the regard of others is through appearance. More specifically, the theory posits that Western culture socializes women to *self-objectify*, that is, to view themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated. As women internalize this view of themselves, they become acutely attuned to their own outward appearance, and detached from an accurate understanding of their own internal states.

Integrating these ideas, the acceptance model posits that when women perceive general unconditional acceptance by others, they are more likely to perceive that their bodies are accepted by others, and they are better equipped to resist self-objectification (Avalos & Tylka, 2006). Rather than focusing on and habitually monitoring their outward appearance, women who perceive that their bodies are accepted by others are more in tune with how their bodies feel and function. This internal awareness facilitates both body appreciation and intuitive eating as women attend to their bodies’ needs. Finally, body appreciation is a proximal predictor of intuitive eating in the model because women who appreciate their bodies respect and care for them by eating adaptively.

The acceptance model has garnered substantial empirical support among undergraduate women (Avalos & Tylka, 2006), college athletes (Hahn Oh, Wiseman, Hendrickson, Phillips, & Hayden, 2012), and community adult women (Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2011). A test of an expanded version that included exercise motives again confirmed the model in both men and women, although paths were generally weaker for men (Tylka & Homan, 2015). A modified version of the model that incorporated social appearance comparison as an additional predictor of body appreciation and intuitive eating was upheld in a sample of adolescents (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2014), and a longitudinal investigation of this modified model supported the proposed relationships over a 1-year time interval (Andrew et al., 2016).

Given the numerous physical and psychological benefits of positive body image (see Tylka, 2017), clinicians may be interested in helping clients increase their body appreciation. Although the acceptance model suggests that the starting point for positive body

image is unconditional body acceptance and approval from other people, it is perhaps not realistic to think that interventions can target how other people communicate their acceptance or disapproval of a client’s body. Therefore, it is important to explore other constructs that contribute to positive body image that are more amenable to intervention.

1.2. Gratitude

At the dispositional level, gratitude has been defined as a habitual orientation toward noticing and appreciating the positive in the world (Wood et al., 2010). It is linked with a wide range of desirable psychological attributes, including life satisfaction, optimism, hope, positive affect, empathy, and forgiveness (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Neto, 2007), as well as reduced symptoms of psychological distress (Kashdan, Uswatte, & Julian, 2006; Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). Gratitude’s links with emotional well-being are so strong and consistent that it has been described as the “poster child” of positive psychology (Watkins, 2014, p. 7). Furthermore, experimental work has shown that gratitude causes positive affect rather than merely being associated with it (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008). For example, in a study that is now regarded as classic, participants who kept daily gratitude lists for two weeks showed increases in positive affect relative to participants who kept daily lists of hassles or downward social comparisons (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Increases in positive affect were mediated by changes in gratitude across the intervention period.

One explanation for why gratitude enhances well-being is the *amplification model of gratitude* (Watkins, 2014). According to Watkins’ formulation, gratitude identifies the good things in life and magnifies them, bringing them into clear and sharp focus. As a result, the individual is motivated to think and behave in ways that will enhance these good things, which ultimately is conducive to well-being. Many of the predictions stemming from the amplification model have been supported. For example, if gratitude amplifies the good that one sees in others, then it follows that grateful people would be more likely to exhibit prosocial traits, such as empathy or forgiveness. Indeed, evidence supports this idea (McCullough et al., 2002; Neto, 2007). Similarly, if gratitude amplifies not only the good that the individual sees in others, but also the good in one’s self, then it would be expected that grateful people would have higher self-esteem. This relationship also has been confirmed (Kong, Ke, & Zhao, 2015; Lin, 2015).

Despite evidence that gratitude is beneficial for multiple aspects of well-being, there has been little research exploring its role in body image and eating behavior. To our knowledge, only three studies have addressed this issue. First, an online intervention study randomly assigned women with high body dissatisfaction to a gratitude condition (daily diary entries), a standard cognitive-behavioral condition, or a wait-list control (Geraghty, Wood, & Hyland, 2010). Results showed that the gratitude intervention produced similar improvement in body image to the cognitive-behavioral treatment, and both showed improvement over the control condition. A similar intervention study found that women assigned to a gratitude condition experienced increased body esteem and decreased body dissatisfaction, dysfunctional eating, and depressive symptoms relative to either a cognitive restructuring or control condition (Wolfe & Patterson, 2017). Finally, a media exposure study showed that five minutes of grateful reflection protected women from the detrimental effects of viewing images that exemplified the thin-ideal (Homan, Sedlak, & Boyd, 2014). Although these studies suggest that gratitude might offer benefits for positive body image and eating behavior, none of them directly assessed positive body image or intuitive eating,

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