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What is and what is not positive body image? Conceptual foundations and construct definition

Tracy L. Tylka[a,*], Nichole L. Wood-Barcalow[b]

[a] Department of Psychology, The Ohio State University, Columbus and Marion Campuses, Columbus, OH, United States
[b] The Center for Balanced Living, Columbus, OH, United States

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ABSTRACT

A decade ago, research on positive body image as a unique construct was relatively nonexistent, and now this area is flourishing. How and why did positive body image scholarship emerge? What is known about this contemporary construct? This article situates and contextualizes positive body image within Cash's scholarship, eating disorder prevention efforts, feminist influences, strength-based disciplines within psychology, and Buddhism. Extracting insights from quantitative and qualitative research, this article demonstrates that positive body image ***is*** (a) distinct from negative body image; (b) multifaceted (including body appreciation, body acceptance/love, conceptualizing beauty broadly, adaptive investment in appearance, inner positivity, interpreting information in a body-protective manner); (c) holistic; (d) stable *and* malleable; (e) protective; (f) linked to self-perceived body acceptance by others; and (g) shaped by social identities. Complementing what positive body image ***is***, this article further details what positive body image ***is not*** to provide a more nuanced understanding of this construct.

Introduction

> Research on positive, adaptive, or healthy body image is essential to the future of the field (Smolak & Cash, 2011, p. 472).

Body image research has a rich history, spanning nearly a century and revealing many insights into its correlates, predictors, consequences, and treatments (Cash, 2004). Upon closer examination, however, much of this history is dominated by a focus on pathology that aimed to understand negative body image in the absence of considering positive body image (Smolak & Cash, 2011; Tylka, 2011, 2012). Focusing on alleviating symptoms of negative body image without considering how to promote positive body image has limited our field by proscribing a comprehensive understanding of body image (Smolak & Cash, 2011), which could inadvertently result in clinicians being poorly equipped to promote health and well-being and, ironically, prevent and treat body image disturbance. If body image therapies reduce symptoms of negative body image, but do not enhance aspects of positive body image, they may promote a neutral body image at best (e.g., "I don't hate my body anymore. I merely tolerate it."). Helping clients adopt a positive body image may help them appreciate, respect, celebrate, and honor their bodies, which may make treatment gains more effective and lasting.

But what is positive body image? How did it emerge? What are its characteristics and expressions? What helps generate positive body image and maintain it? Without exploring this construct, we do not know the vital answers to these significant questions. Fortunately, two events helped propel the study of positive body image forward. First, the original edition of *Body Image: A Handbook of Theory, Research, and Clinical Practice* called for researchers to (a) conceptualize embodiment as complex and varied by moving beyond the study of appearance to body functionality, and (b) study the development and experience of a positive body image by exploring its resilience and protective factors (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002). On a personal note, this handbook inspired us to begin developing measures of positive body image to investigate its distinctiveness via quantitative and qualitative designs. Alas, where could we publish our work, since many body- and eating-related journal outlets were focused on pathology? This dilemma was resolved with the inception of *Body Image: An International Journal of Research* in 2004, spearheaded by Editor-in-Chief Thomas Cash. In its Aims and Scope, the journal has encouraged submissions on positive body image by calling for research on (a) factors that influence positive body image development, (b) adaptive body image processes and their clinically relevant consequences on psychological functioning and quality of life, and (c) interventions to

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Ohio State University, 225 Psychology Building, Columbus, OH 43210, United States. Tel.: +1 740 725 6384; fax: +1 614 292 5817.
E-mail address: tylka.2@osu.edu (T.L. Tylka).

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promote positive body image. Scholars interested in positive body image could now be assured that a journal would appreciate their rigorous and seminal contributions to the study of positive embodiment, thus making *Body Image: An International Journal of Research* the second event that helped propel positive body image research forward.

As Cash (2004) reflected in his editorial article introducing *Body Image: An International Journal of Research*, the field of body image is "evolving in intriguing directions" (p. 2). Given the influence of the two abovementioned events, positive body image now happens to be one of these directions. Cash and Smolak (2011), in the second edition of the handbook *Body Image: A Handbook of Science, Practice, and Prevention*, devoted an entire chapter toward synthesizing the "handful of published studies on positive body image" using positive psychology as its conceptual foundation (Tylka, 2011, p. 56). Four years later, we are happy to report that there are several hundred studies on positive body image, making it an understatement to say that positive body image research is gaining momentum. These seminal works have provided clarity on the characteristics and correlates of positive body image (i.e., what positive body image ***is*** and what it ***is not***), which we review in this article. Prior to this review, however, we recognize the disciplines and leaders who set the stage for positive body image inquiry.

The Rise of Positive Body Image Inquiry: Foundations and Leaders

Given the long history of equating body image research with negative body image, how did the study of positive body image both emerge and flourish? Which disciplines, and who within these disciplines, prompted the exploration of positive body image? We emphasize that the confluence of several disciplines, and leaders within disciplines, positioned the study of positive body image to be imperative and ripe for discovery.

Influences within the Body Image Field

Thomas Cash. As noted previously, Thomas Cash is the innovator and common denominator of the two events that propelled positive body image research forward: the emphasis of positive body image as a future direction for research within the first edition of *Body Image: A Handbook of Theory, Research, and Clinical Practice* (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002) and the inclusion of positive body image inquiry within the Aims and Scope of *Body Image: An International Journal of Research*. In addition to these foundational contributions, it is also important to acknowledge Cash's (and his collaborators') additional contributions to understanding and assessing positive body image. For example, Cash and his colleagues conducted the first study documenting positive body image as a unique construct (Williams, Cash, & Santos, 2004). Below, we acknowledge Cash's seminal contributions of body image quality of life, positive rational acceptance coping, and clinical interventions to positive body image scholarship.

Cash and Fleming (2002) investigated the positive and negative impacts of body image on college women's quality of life. Without exception, college women reported more positive than negative consequences of their body image for the 19 life domains studied (e.g., feelings of personal adequacy, interactions with friends, acceptability as a sexual partner, happiness in everyday life, grooming activities, ability to control weight) in this initial validation study. This finding was monumental, as it countered prevailing notions that most women dislike their bodies and body image adversely impacts their well-being. In a second study, Cash, Jakatdar, and Williams (2004) further investigated body image quality of life among college women and men. For both women and men, body image quality of life was inversely associated with body dissatisfaction, negative body image emotions in various situational contexts, and self-evaluative salience (a dysfunctional over-valuation of appearance that is inextricably connected to self-worth) and positively associated with self-esteem, optimism, and social support. More favorable body image quality of life was reported by men (compared to women), by African American women (compared to White women), and by women with a lower (compared to higher) body mass index (BMI).

Cash, Santos, and Williams (2005) coined and studied positive rational acceptance, which entails engaging in adaptive mental and behavioral activities, such as positive self-care and rational self-talk, that reflect the acceptance of body image-related threats. Examples of threats to body image include being teased about weight, seeing advertisements containing dieting messages and/or models who conform to media appearance ideals, being told to go on a diet, conversing with someone who begins to engage in body talk, being weighed at the doctor's office, and realizing an article of clothing has become tighter in the waistband. During body image-related threats, individuals high in positive rational acceptance may remind themselves of their good qualities and tell themselves that the situation will pass or may not be that important. Indeed, positive rational acceptance was related to positive psychological functioning, although more so for college women than men (Cash et al., 2005).

In the second edition of his *Body Image Workbook*, Cash (2008) articulated an 8-step, cognitive-behavioral program that contains interventions for readers to develop a more mindful, accepting, and satisfying relationship with their bodies. Among the interventions, self-care and maintaining a positive body image are emphasized. For example in Step 8: Positive Body-Self Relations, Cash designed specific activities to enhance appreciation of the body's health, fitness, and sensate experiences, which emphasize the importance of body functionality to body image.

Prevention. Researchers of eating disorder prevention efforts, such as Michael Levine, Lori Irving, Niva Piran, Linda Smolak, Catherine Steiner-Adair, Susan Paxton, and Catherine Cook-Cottone, also helped develop positive body image scholarship and clinical practice. One strategy to prevent the onset of an eating disorder is to foster positive body image as a way to circumvent the development of a negative body image (Smolak, 1999), and these scholars have traditionally conceptualized positive body image to include self-worth and appreciation for the functionality and diverse appearances of the body (Menzel & Levine, 2011; Paxton, 1999; Piran, Levine, & Steiner-Adair, 1999; Smolak, 1999). Prevention researchers have devised ways to build positive body image. For example, many programs contain efforts to increase media literacy, which build skills to protect body image against unrealistic media appearance ideals (Cook-Cottone, Kane, Keddie, & Haugli, 2013; Steiner-Adair & Sjostrom, 2006; Wilksch & Wade, 2009). Some programs help participants develop an appreciation for their bodies via nurturing body awareness and responsiveness via yoga (Cook-Cottone et al., 2013; Scime & Cook-Cottone, 2008). Cognitive dissonance-based prevention programs include behavioral activities whereby participants speak or write positively about their bodies, including their bodies' physical, emotional, intellectual, and social qualities (Becker & Stice, 2011; Stice & Presnell, 2007).

Feminist influences. Feminist scholars in the body image field have also contributed to positive body image theory, research, and practice. They argue that it is acceptable and preferable for bodies to differ from societal ideals and champion for a culture that resists engaging in body hate or shame-based dialog and action. They uncover and challenge the various media motives to use bodies and appearances to sell products.