



Brief research report

Weight discrepancy and body appreciation among women in Poland and Britain

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have suggested that the process of transmigration has detrimental effects on the body image of migrants relative to women in the country of origin. In the present work, we examined the body image of Polish migrants in Britain ($n = 153$), Polish women in Poland ($n = 153$), and a comparison group of British White women ($n = 110$). Participants completed a measure of actual-ideal weight discrepancy and the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS). Contrary to hypotheses, our results showed that Polish women in Poland had significantly higher weight discrepancy than their counterparts in Britain. Further analyses showed that the BAS reduced to two dimensions among Polish participants, with Polish participants in Poland having significantly lower body appreciation than Polish migrants. We suggest that the sociocultural changes that have taken place in Eastern Europe may place women in that region at relatively high risk for developing negative body image.

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Introduction

It has been suggested that, prior to the adoption of free market economics in Eastern Europe, Communism protected women in that region from negative body image through the rejection of objectification and through its emphasis on egalitarianism (Catina & Joja, 2001; Haavio-Mannila & Purhonen, 2001). Although this claim has been contested (Eisler, 2001), it is clear that the introduction of Western values and a market economy contributed to sociocultural changes (e.g., changes in the role of women, an influx of Western media portraying a thin ideal), which in turn led to a rise in body dissatisfaction among women (Catina & Joja, 2001; Rathner, 2001). In fact, studies now report that the incidence of negative body image is comparable between Eastern European and Western European or American women (Forbes, Doroszewicz, Card, & Adams-Curtis, 2004; Frederick, Forbes, & Berezovskaya, 2008; Swami et al., 2010).

Poland is an important site in which to investigate these issues, given that it was one of the first Eastern European countries to adopt Western values (Forbes et al., 2004). In addition, the prevalence of overweight and obesity has increased dramatically in the past forty years, with scholars attributing this to the socio-political changes that occurred post-1989 (Chrzanowska, Koziel, & Ulijaszek, 2007). Where studies have compared Polish and Western women

on measures of body image, including weight discrepancy, desire to lose weight, and internalization of media messages about appearance, there appear to be few differences (Al Sabbah et al., 2009; Forbes et al., 2004; Swami et al., 2010). There is also evidence that the thin ideal has become ubiquitous among urban Poles and that up to 70% of normal-weight Polish women want to be slimmer (Pawlińska-Chmara, Wronka, Suliga, & Broczek, 2007).

Just as important as examining body image within particular national contexts is the need to investigate how the process of transmigration affects body image. Following the 2004 enlargement of the European Union, a large number of Polish-born individuals migrated to Britain, where they are now one of the largest ethnic minority groups (Burrell, 2009). Importantly, there is evidence to suggest that non-Western migrants to Western national settings adopt the beauty ideals of the host culture (Tovée, Swami, Furnham, & Mangalparsad, 2006), which contributes to relatively greater body image disturbance among migrants than individuals in the country of origin (Swami, Mada, & Tovée, 2012). We are not aware of previous studies that have examined the impact of transmigration on Polish women's body image specifically, although there is evidence that the process of acculturation may detrimentally affect the body esteem of Eastern European women (Sussman, Truong, & Lim, 2007).

Here, we examined scores on measures of body image among Polish women in Poland and Britain, in relation to British White women. To operationalize body image, we measured participants' actual-ideal weight discrepancy (a measure of perceptual body dissatisfaction) and body appreciation (a measure of positive regard for one's body). Based on the above review, we hypothesized that

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there would be no significant differences in body image between British White women and Polish women in Poland. However, we also expected that Polish women in Britain would show more negative body image than their counterparts in Poland and Britain.

Method

Participants

Poland. Participants in Poland were a total of 153 women from the community in Warsaw, an important economic node in Eastern and Central Europe with one of the highest GDPs per capita in the region. Participants in this group ranged in age from 18 to 66 years ($M = 33.45$, $SD = 13.05$) and in body mass index (BMI) from 15.92 to 38.86 kg/m² ($M = 23.55$, $SD = 4.78$). All participants were ethnic Poles and, in terms of religious affiliation, 65.4% self-reported being Catholic, 7.8% as Protestant, 4.6% as atheists, and 22.2% as being of some other religious affiliation. In terms of educational qualifications, 61.3% had completed secondary schooling, 21.3% had an undergraduate degree, 10.0% had a postgraduate degree, and 7.3% had some other qualification. In this sample, 24.7% of participants were single, 23.3% were in a relationship, 40.7% were married, 4.7% were divorced or separated, and the remainder were of some other marital status.

Polish migrants. Participants in this group were 153 Polish women recruited from the community in London. All participants were first-generation migrants who had been resident in Britain for between 1 and 21 years ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 2.50$). Participants, all of whom were ethnic Poles, ranged in age from 18 to 67 years ($M = 34.63$, $SD = 13.11$) and in BMI from 14.32 to 38.86 kg/m² ($M = 22.78$, $SD = 4.18$). In terms of religious affiliation, 57.0% self-reported as being Catholic, 7.9% were Protestant, 7.3% were atheists, and 27.8% were of some other religious affiliation. Of this sample, 50.0% had completed secondary schooling, 28.9% had an undergraduate degree, 11.2% had a postgraduate degree, and 9.9% had some other qualification. Of this sample, 23.3% were single, 30.0% were in a relationship, 35.3% were married, 7.3% were separated or divorced, and 4.0% were of some other status.

Britain. We also recruited a total 110 British White women from the community in London. Participants in this group ranged in age from 18 to 66 years ($M = 34.83$, $SD = 12.62$) and in BMI from 16.28 to 34.89 kg/m² ($M = 23.18$, $SD = 4.08$). The majority of participants in this group self-reported as being Protestants (51.8%), while 23.4% were atheists, 14.3% were Catholics, and the remainder were of some other religious affiliation. Of this sample, 56.5% had completed secondary schooling, 24.1% had an undergraduate degree, 11.1% had a postgraduate degree, and 8.3% had some other qualification. Here, 17.8% of participants were single, 29.0% were in a relationship, 42.1% were married, 5.6% were separated or divorced, and the remainder were of some other marital status.

Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained from the relevant ethics committee. The survey was initially prepared in English and a Polish version was developed using the standard back-translation technique (Breslin, 1970). The second author translated the scales into Polish and this version was then translated into English by an independent translator not affiliated with the study. Minor differences were settled by agreement between the two translators. Two female researchers recruited participants from Warsaw using an opportunistic method of sampling. Potential participants were approached in public areas (e.g., libraries, shopping districts, parks) and invited to take part in a study on body image. Participants

completed the survey in a quiet location set up for the purposes of the study and returned completed surveys to the researchers in a sealed envelope. Once a sufficiently large sample had been recruited in Poland, the same female researchers recruited an age-matched sample of Polish migrants and British White participants in London. Potential participants were recruited directly from the researchers' social networks and typically completed the surveys in their own homes, with completed surveys being returned to the researchers in sealed envelopes. Age-matching was conducted by recruiting participants in Britain based on 5-year age grouping comparable to participants in Poland. The survey was presented in Polish for Polish migrants and in English for British White women. All participants provided informed consent and completed paper-and-pencil surveys in which the order of presentation of the scales was counterbalanced. Participants were provided with a debrief sheet upon completion of the survey. All participants took part on a voluntary basis and were not remunerated for participation.

Measures

Weight discrepancy. We measured actual-ideal weight discrepancy using the Photographic Figure Rating Scale (PFRS; Swami, Salem, Furnham, & Tov  , 2008). This scale presents participants with 10 greyscale photographic images of women ranging in body size from emaciated to obese. Participants were asked to rate the figure that most closely matched their own body (current) and the figure they would most like to possess (ideal). All ratings were made on a 10-point scale (1 = *Figure with the lowest BMI*, 10 = *Figure with the highest BMI*) and, following earlier work (e.g., Swami, Stieger, et al., 2012) weight discrepancy was computed as the difference between unsigned current and ideal ratings. Participants were also asked to rate the figure they believed men of their age and cultural group found most attractive and the figure that best represents the body that is typical for a woman of their age and cultural background. The PFRS has good psychometric properties and test–retest reliability after three weeks (Swami, Campana, Fereirra, Barrett, Harris, & Tavares, 2011; Swami, Stieger, et al., 2012; Swami, Stieger, Haubner, & Voracek, 2008; Swami, Taylor, & Carvalho, 2011).

Body appreciation. Body appreciation was measured using the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS; Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005), a 13-item scale that measures aspects of positive body image. All items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *Never*, 5 = *Always*). Previous studies among Western samples have shown that the BAS has a one-dimensional structure and good psychometric properties (Avalos et al., 2005; Swami, Stieger, et al., 2008). By contrast, among non-Western samples, the scale appears to reduce to two dimensions that measure general body appreciation and body image investment, respectively (Swami, Campana, et al., 2011; Swami & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2008; Swami, Mada, et al., 2012; Swami, Taylor, et al., 2011). Because we are not aware of its previous use in Polish, we examined the factor structure of the BAS in the present study.

Subjective social status. Participants were asked to complete the McArthur Ladder of Subjective Social Status (MLSSS; Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000), a measure of subjective social status that is presented as a 'social ladder'. Participants were asked to select which rung of the ladder best described their social status. Responses on this scale range from 1 to 10, with lower values indicating lower subjective ratings. Ratings on the MLSSS have been shown to correlate with measures of objective social status (Adler et al., 2000).

Demographics. Participants provided their demographic details, namely age, ethnicity, religion, educational qualifications,

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