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Downward spirals of body surveillance and weight/shape concern among African American and Caucasian college women

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ABSTRACT

Within dominant American culture, females often learn to view themselves from an observer's perspective and to treat themselves as objects to be looked at (i.e., self-objectification), which can result in negative outcomes. Body surveillance (the indicator of self-objectification) has been found to predict concern with weight/shape in predominantly Caucasian samples, but research has not yet examined the potential reciprocal relations between body surveillance and weight/shape concern. Participants were 226 women attending a Midwestern university (70 self-identified as African American and 156 as Caucasian) who provided data at two time points, spaced about 5 months apart. Results revealed that downward spirals of body surveillance and weight/shape concern were apparent for the Caucasian but not the African American women. However, there was evidence that body surveillance helped account for change in weight/shape concern for the African American women.

Introduction

Objectification theory, as construed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), suggests that females are acculturated to internalize the objectifying observer's perspective of their bodies. This self-objectification often occurs as a result of sexual objectification, the experience of being treated solely as a body that exists for the use and pleasure of others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). It is not uncommon for a woman to feel sexually objectified (often by men), as her "sexual parts or functions are separated out from her person, reduced to status of mere instruments, or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her" (Bartky, 1990, p. 35). Such sexualization may occur in many forms, such as via sexual violence or through gaze (i.e., visual inspection of the body; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), and as previously suggested, may then "coax" females into adopting a view of themselves as objects (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 177).

Further, given that Western culture positions appearance, particularly a thin figure, as central to a woman's value as a person (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984; Spitzack, 1990; Stice, 1994), many women feel they must engage in constant body surveillance in order to ensure their compliance with cultural standards of thinness (i.e., the thin ideal; Gilbert & Thompson, 1996; McKinley, 2004; Thompson & Stice, 2001). Indeed, research has indicated that body surveillance is the behavioral manifestation of self-objectification; that is, if a woman has internalized the observer's perspective of her own body, she will engage in persistent body surveillance or monitoring (e.g., Moradi, 2010, 2011). It is via this self-surveillance that many women realize there is a discrepancy between what they see and what they feel they ought to look like, and thus, may experience shame (i.e., not simply negative feelings regarding the body, but about the self) and weight/shape concern (i.e., includes dissatisfaction with the body and such things as overvaluation of and preoccupation with weight/shape; McKinley & Hyde, 1996; Ross & Wade, 2004). Little is known, however, in terms of the potential reciprocal relations between body surveillance and weight/shape concern (i.e., body surveillance increasing weight/shape concern and weight/shape concern increasing body surveillance) and in terms of how these factors relate to each other in ethnic minority groups, which may have different cultural expectations for women's bodies. This study seeks to test such reciprocal relations in African American and Caucasian college women.

Existing research suggests that African American women may experience lower levels of trait self-objectification than Caucasian women (Hebl, King, & Lin, 2004). Specifically, African American women generally report lower levels of the manifestation of self-objectification, body surveillance (Breitkopf, Littleton, & Berenson, 2007; Moradi & Huang, 2008); however, some studies suggest a more complex picture. For example, Harrison and Fredrickson (2003) found that Caucasian adolescents' state self-objectification increased after exposure to lean female athletes

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(e.g., gymnasts) only, while for participants of color, an increase in state self-objectification was apparent only in response to non-lean female athletes (e.g., basketball players). There is also support for African American women experiencing less body dissatisfaction than Caucasian women, for whom body image disturbance has been described as a "normative discontent" (Rodin et al., 1984). For various reasons (e.g., a more fluid sense of beauty, less reliance on media images for comparison) and despite their larger body sizes, African American women tend to be more satisfied with their bodies than Caucasian women (e.g., Akan & Grilo, 1995; Altabe, 1998; Barry & Grilo, 2002; Baugh, Mullis, Mullis, Hicks, & Peterson, 2010; Gordon, Castro, Sitnikov, & Holm-Denoma, 2010; Roberts, Cash, Feingold, & Johnson, 2006; Story, French, & Resnick, 1995; Wildes, Emery, & Simons, 2001). However, there is some evidence that effect sizes are typically in the small to medium range (Grabe & Hyde, 2006) and that ethnic differences in body dissatisfaction may be diminishing (Roberts et al., 2006). Further, some research has not found differences in levels of body dissatisfaction between Caucasian and racial/ethnic minority girls and women in the United States (e.g., DeLeel, Hughes, Miller, Hipwell, & Theodore, 2009; Shaw, Ramirez, Trost, Randall, & Stice, 2004). Thus, research has begun to emphasize the myriad factors that may impact whether an African American woman experiences dissatisfaction with her body (e.g., identification with White or Black culture, floating between both cultures; Hesse-Biber, Livingstone, Ramirez, Barko, & Johnson, 2010).

Researchers have suggested that the development of weight/shape concern can be explained at least in part by self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley, 1998; McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Indeed, given cultural standards of thinness and unrealistic ideals, self-objectification and weight/shape concern often co-exist for those in the majority group. Researchers have found that the body surveillance component of self-objectification is associated with weight/shape concern in cross-sectional studies of Caucasian women (e.g., Knauss, Paxton, & Alsaker, 2008; Miner-Rubino, Twenge, & Fredrickson, 2002; Muehlenkamp, Swanson, & Brausch, 2005; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001), but to date, what is still unknown is whether body surveillance leads to weight/shape concern and whether weight/shape concern leads to increased levels of body surveillance as well. Further, research on the nature of these relations among African American women is extremely limited. Only two known studies to date have examined aspects of the relation between body surveillance and weight/shape concern in this group (i.e., Buchanan, Fischer, Tokar, & Yoder, 2008; Mitchell & Mazzeo, 2009), but neither of these used prospective designs. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study to examine whether body surveillance and weight/shape concern reciprocally influence each other, and one of only a few studies that have examined the relations between these factors in African American women.

Why might weight/shape concern lead to increased levels of body surveillance? According to McKinley and Hyde (1996), constant self-surveillance is necessary to ensure that one complies with cultural body standards and avoids negative judgments. Seemingly, when one is dissatisfied with the body or concerned with weight/shape (e.g., not thin enough, not a culturally desirable shape), one would continue to survey the body with the hopes of monitoring and reducing those discrepancies. That is, when women experience weight/shape concern, they may continue to monitor areas that they perceive to be flawed in order to constantly ascertain whether those areas are still discrepant with their ideal, no longer discrepant with their ideal, etc. Weight/shape concern may prompt efforts to resolve discrepancies between the actual and ideal selves (e.g., dieting, wearing different clothes), and body surveillance may be one way for a woman to figure out if such efforts are "working." Thus, it is believed that the relation between body surveillance and weight/shape concern should, at least in theory, be considered reciprocal. We speculate that not only does body surveillance lead to concern with weight/shape (e.g., Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), but that weight/shape concern likely also leads to increased surveillance and inspection of the body.

While we believe that body surveillance and weight/shape concern serially influence each other among Caucasian women, it is not clear that the same would be true for African Americans. As aforementioned, African American women tend to be more satisfied with their bodies than Caucasians (e.g., Barry & Grilo, 2002). Further, even if African American women are unhappy with their bodies, the consequences of such dissatisfaction and concern are likely not as far-reaching as they may be for Caucasian women. Specifically, Breitkopf et al. (2007) and Parker, Nichter, Nichter, Vuckovic, Sims, and Ritenbaugh (1995) hypothesize that because African American women are more likely to define attractiveness in a multifaceted way (e.g., including such things as style and personality), they likely spend less time worrying about what others think about their physical appearance. If attractiveness is defined in a comprehensive manner (rather than largely dependent on body shape, size, and weight), it seems as though constant surveillance of the body would be less necessary and not as practical/functional of a consequence of weight/shape concern as it might be for Caucasian women, who are likely hoping to find and reduce any discrepancies that exist between their own bodies and the thin ideal.

The hypothesized reciprocal relations between body surveillance and weight/shape concern underlie our hypothesis that body surveillance and weight/shape concern interact in a downward spiral-type fashion. Specifically, it is believed that the effects of both body surveillance and weight/shape concern should accumulate and reciprocally spur each other as consequences. This concept has been applied to reciprocal relations before, but with a focus on upward spirals whereby positive affect and positive coping were found to mutually build on each other (Burns et al., 2008). Since the work by Burns and colleagues focused on emotional well-being, the choice of the descriptor "upward" spirals is apt; however, since our focus is on less healthy attitudes/behaviors, we have chosen to describe the nature of the relations as "downward" spirals. It is expected that the act of body surveillance will increase an individual's weight/shape concern, and that in turn, weight/shape concern should predict future increases in body surveillance.

In the present study, we tested hypotheses related to downward spirals by examining body surveillance and weight/shape concern at two time points. Specifically, our first hypothesis was that initial weight/shape concern would predict subsequent weight/shape concern, at least in part through ongoing experiences of body surveillance. Similarly, our second hypothesis was that initial body surveillance would predict subsequent body surveillance, in part through ongoing experiences of weight/shape concern. Based on prior research, it was expected that the hypothesized relations would hold for Caucasian college women, but because of the limited data related to African American college women and these constructs, no specific hypotheses were generated for this group. Support for these hypotheses would confirm the reciprocal relation between these two constructs and the idea that body surveillance and weight/shape concern serially influence one another in a downward spiral-type fashion.

Method

Participants

Participants at Time 1 (T1) were 276 women attending a Midwestern university; 97 (35%) described themselves as African American/Black, and 179 as Caucasian non-Hispanic/White. At Time 2 (T2), 70 African American women and 156 Caucasian women provided data; all analyses and statistics reported refer to this