

CHAPTER 1

Understanding Body Images

Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

THOMAS F. CASH
LINDA SMOLAK

Introduction

Looking back over a century of scholarly efforts to understand the profoundly human experience of embodiment that defines “body image,” we find a very rich and inspiring history. From diverse perspectives, behavioral scientists, physicians, and philosophers have theorized about the nature and significance of body image. Researchers have made systematic observations to test their ideas and discover the meanings of body image. Clinical practitioners have pursued remedies, both body changing and mind changing, to help people whose quality of life is diminished by their body image experiences. Other applied researchers have developed interventions for the prevention of body image problems among youth.

This introductory chapter offers a historical and conceptual context for the volume. We highlight important milestones in body image scholarship during the 20th century and first decade of this century. We identify specific published books that reflect the growth of knowledge in the field. Finally, we articulate contemporary perspectives on body image by summarizing the organization and contents of this handbook, which speak to its rationale and uniqueness.

Milestones in Body Image Scholarship

20th-Century Legacies

Understanding modern perspectives on body image requires insight into the lineage of the body image construct. Early in the 1900s, neurologists studying and treating brain injuries sought to make sense of a variety of unusual forms of body perception and experience reported by their patients. There was also considerable effort to understand “phantom limb,” in which amputees report sensory experiences associated with the missing limb. Early “body image” research was dominated by investigation of what Henry Head termed *the body schema*, a hypothetical neural mechanism whereby changes in body posture and movement were proposed to be centrally coordinated. Little consideration was given to psychological variables in theorizing about body image.

Paul Schilder, who was trained as a neurologist, was “single-handedly” responsible for moving the study of body image beyond the exclusive domain of neuropathology and was “the first to devote entire volumes to the topic of body image” (Fisher, 1990, p. 12). In his 1935 *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body*, Schilder presciently argued for a biopsychosocial approach to body image, emphasizing the need to examine its neurological, psychological, and sociocultural elements. Historically, one of the most important body image scholars was Seymour Fisher who, with his colleague Sidney Cleveland, published two editions of the text *Body Image and Personality* in 1958 and 1968. Their work reflected the then pervasive psychodynamic views of body image, especially Fisher’s theorizing about the construct of *body image boundaries*. Their empirical research focused on the “barrier” and “penetration” boundary dimensions posited to reflect the strength or permeability of body boundaries. These investigations, with “normal” subjects as well as psychiatric and medical patients, almost invariably used projective methodologies, including the Holtzman or Rorschach Inkblot Tests. Fisher’s 1986 two-volume opus, *Development and Structure of the Body Image*, is the apex of the portion of his career devoted to body image scholarship. Volume 1 consists of a comprehensive review of research from 1969 through 1985. Volume 2 analyzes and synthesizes data pertinent to Fisher’s own concepts, including “body image boundary, assignment of meaning to specific body areas, general body awareness, and distortions in body perception” (p. xi). Seymour Fisher died in 1996, yet these works remain testimony to his insightful and prolific contributions to the field.

Franklin Shontz, in his 1969 *Perceptual and Cognitive Aspects of Body Experience* and in later writings, was a pioneer in directing body image research away from the domination of a psychodynamic paradigm. Shontz argued that the shift from neurological to psychodynamic conceptions had removed “body” from body image. He also critically noted that Fisher’s psychodynamic view of body image as “a projection screen

for emotional learning and experience” served to eradicate the “image” from body image by operationally defining it as a manifestation of perceiving inkblots or other ambiguous stimuli (see Shontz, 1990, p. 156). Shontz redressed these limitations in several ways as he argued for the study of multifaceted “body experience.” He postulated seven functions of body image experience and four or more levels of these functions. He emphasized the use of diverse scientific methods and encouraged expansion and integration of theoretical developments, especially from field theory, Gestalt psychology, and cognitive theory. Furthermore, Shontz sought to put the body back into body image, partly by applying body image concepts to the study of physical disability and health psychology. He endeavored to return the image to body image by articulating cognitive and perceptual dimensions of body experience.

The Productive 1990s

The 1990s was a pivotal decade in the evolution of body image scholarship. This was a productive period of conceptual, psychometric, and psychotherapeutic developments. In 1990 Cash and Pruzinsky published *Body Images: Development, Deviance, and Change*, an edited volume that stressed the multidimensionality of body image and expanded its application into areas of investigation previously inadequately explored—for example, disfigurement, disability and rehabilitation, and cosmetic and reconstructive surgery. In the same year, J. Kevin Thompson authored *Body Image Disturbance: Assessment and Treatment*, followed by his 1996 edited book, *Body Image, Eating Disorders, and Obesity: An Integrative Guide for Assessment and Treatment*. Reflecting the burgeoning scientific and clinical interest in eating disorders and obesity, these works enhanced our knowledge of the assessment and treatment of body image disorders. Reflecting a growing clinical interest in body dysmorphic disorder, in 1996, Katharine Phillips published an informative volume, *The Broken Mirror: Understanding and Treating Body Dysmorphic Disorder* (revised in 2005).

In 1999, *Exacting Beauty: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment of Body Image Disturbance*, written by Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, and Tantleff-Dunn, provided a needed compilation and synthesis of the extensive progress in body image research. Sarah Grogan’s 1999 book, *Body Image: Understanding Body Dissatisfaction in Men, Women, and Children*, similarly offered a detailed and scholarly review of the literature.

Emergent in this decade was the development and scientific evaluation of a cognitive-behavioral treatment approach to body image problems. In 1991, Cash published his *Body Image Therapy* program as an audiotape series with client and clinician manuals. Subsequent versions of the program appeared in 1995 as *What Do You See When You Look in the Mirror?* and in 1997 as *The Body Image Workbook*.

The New Millennium

During this century's initial decade, body image scholarship continued to flourish. Perhaps the most significant milestone has been the publication of a peer-reviewed scientific journal, *Body Image: An International Journal of Research*. Launched in 2004, this quarterly journal has provided a dedicated home for high-quality body image research from the behavioral sciences as well as the medical/health sciences. Evident in the pages of the journal is the growth in the investigation of body image among boys and men, among diverse cultures, and among persons with a range of psychological disorders and appearance-altering medical disorders. Also apparent is the expansion of work to develop better assessments of body image as a multidimensional construct and to evaluate interventions to treat and prevent body image problems.

In 2001, Thompson and Smolak edited a long-overdue volume about body image in childhood and adolescence and the prevention of body image problems, *Body Image, Eating Disorders, and Obesity in Youth: Assessment, Prevention, and Treatment*. They published their second edition of this work in 2009. Grogan also published the second edition of her comprehensive book in 2008. Thompson's edited 2004 *Handbook of Eating Disorders and Obesity* thoroughly incorporated a consideration of body image. The decade brought new attention to male body image issues with *The Adonis Complex: The Secret Crisis of Male Body Obsession* published by Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia in 2000. Advances in this area are also evident in *The Muscular Ideal* that Thompson and Cafri edited in 2007. Castle and Phillips edited their informative *Disorders of Body Image* in 2002. Another overdue volume was Rumsey and Harcourt's 2005 *The Psychology of Appearance*, which provides a valuable understanding of the body image and social experiences of persons with disfiguring conditions. Furthermore, reflecting the editorial collaboration of three psychologists and three plastic surgeons, in 2006 David Sarwer and his colleagues assembled a unique book entitled *Psychological Aspects of Reconstructive and Cosmetic Plastic Surgery*.

During the past few years, the clinical treatment of body image disorders and difficulties continues to receive attention. For example, in 2008 Cash published the second edition of his *Body Image Workbook* that details a cognitive-behavioral program for body image change. Several workbooks and manuals to assist persons with body dysmorphic disorder have been published, including Veale and Neziroglu's detailed *Body Dysmorphic Disorder* treatment manual in 2010.

Contemporary Perspectives on Body Image: Organization and Contents of the Handbook

In the first edition of this handbook in 2002, Cash and Pruzinsky presented evidence that confirmed the continuous growth in body image research

over the previous 50 years, from 1951 to 2000. This growth has clearly persisted in the first decade of the 21st century. A search of two prominent research databases, PsycINFO and Medline, indicates that the number of body image publications in each database more than doubled from 2000 through 2010 relative to the 1990s. Not long ago, most body image research focused on eating pathology and weight/shape concerns among White female college students. The variety of contexts and populations in which body image is explored has broadened considerably. These impressive developments are expounded and elucidated by the contributors to this handbook. We have organized their chapters into eight substantive sections:

Conceptual Foundations

This first section of the book presents an array of conceptual approaches for understanding human appearance and body image. Our contributors present important, wide-ranging perspectives, including sociocultural, evolutionary, genetic and neuroscientific, cognitive-behavioral, and feminist (objectification theory) viewpoints, as well as a chapter discussing positive psychology perspectives on body image. In this section, authors thoughtfully articulate concepts, principles, and propositions applicable to the empirical data and clinical observations presented throughout the book.

Developmental Perspectives and Influences

In the second section seven chapters describe the development of body image across the lifespan, with special emphasis on understanding the unique body experiences of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood in both males and females. These body image trajectories are further elucidated in chapters that carefully examine the influences of cultural media, family systems, and other interpersonal relationships as well as the impact of sexual abuse. The developmental context is essential for understanding virtually all body image experiences, whether adaptive or dysfunctional.

Body Image Assessment

The scientific study of body image requires thoughtful and precise measurement of its components and dimensions. This section begins with a chapter on crucial considerations in the assessment of body image. It is followed by a chapter on assessing body image among children and two chapters on assessments for adolescents and adults. One targets perceptual body image measures and discusses both the pitfalls and the progress associated with these types of assessments. The other provides a practical compendium of both new and commonly used validated assessments of

various facets of the attitudinal body image construct. Collectively, these chapters offer comprehensive yet concise guidelines for scientists and practitioners to understand methodological, psychometric, and practical issues in measuring body image.

Individual and Cultural Differences

A genuine understanding of body image requires a deep appreciation for the diversity of cultural and personal contexts of embodiment. Building upon the foundations of the handbook's reviews of conceptual and developmental perspectives, this extensive section offers 11 chapters that examine a range of cultural and individual differences in body image experiences. These chapters summarize literatures on body image diversity related to gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. They include consideration of the expanding research on non-Western societies. To elucidate individual differences in body image functioning, they examine the influences of adiposity, muscularity, athleticism, and disfiguring congenital conditions on body image functioning.

Body Image Dysfunctions and Disorders

Many students of body image are interested in the myriad difficulties and disorders of body experience. In this section of the handbook, contributors review the explosive growth of observations and evidence in the study of body image dysfunctions and disorders. This section's seven chapters highlight difficulties that range from "common" body image discontent to more severe disturbances, including body dysmorphic disorder and eating disorders (i.e., anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder). Chapters consider the importance of body image to both social functioning and sexual functioning as well as in relation to appearance- and performance-enhancing drug use.

Body Image Issues in Medical Contexts

One of the new frontiers of scholarship is the elucidation of the body image challenges associated with physical diseases and disorders. An obvious but oft-neglected fact is that body image issues accompany changes in the appearance and functioning of the human body, and that these changes can dramatically affect quality of life. Such issues are routinely encountered in many medical specialties. This section of the handbook samples five of these areas: dermatology, oncology, obstetrics and gynecology, rheumatology, and medical specialties associated with the treatment of burn injuries. Contributors summarize the state of our scientific knowledge of body image in these specialties and offer constructive guidance for future research, as well as clinical practice.

Changing the Body: Medical, Surgical, and Other Approaches

This first of two sections on body image change focuses on one central question: Does changing the body lead to a changed body image? The chapters in this section review the scientific evidence regarding body image changes as a result of physical interventions, such as weight loss (including bariatric surgery), systematic exercise regimens, cosmetic surgery for “elective” appearance changes, and reconstructive surgeries for congenital and acquired disfiguring conditions. Included in this section is a chapter that uniquely considers another form of body modification—body art (e.g., tattooing and piercing).

Changing Body Images: Psychosocial Interventions for Treatment and Prevention

This second section on body image change offers an array of psychotherapeutic and psychoeducational interventions. The empirically validated cognitive-behavioral approaches to body image change are reviewed, as well as less well-researched but clinically common experiential approaches. Four chapters tackle the imperative topic of prevention—how to effectively prevent body image problems that themselves threaten quality of life and also are risk factors for other difficulties such as eating disorders and depression. One chapter delineates school-based psychoeducational interventions. The second considers computer-based interventions. The third articulates ecological and activism approaches to prevention and the fourth discusses changes in public policy to prevent body image problems and their consequences.

Conclusions and Directions

The handbook’s final section contains the editors’ chapter “Future Challenges for Body Image Science, Practice, and Prevention.” Drawing upon the contents of the volume, this chapter offers an organized series of epigrammatic statements regarding the most important future directions for body image research and its application to treatment and prevention.

Conclusions

The scientific study of body image has a fascinating history and continues to be a rapidly growing field. Human experiences of embodiment affect many aspects of psychosocial functioning and quality of life. This volume provides the state of the science vis-à-vis our knowledge of body image

development and functioning, as well as our knowledge of the prevention and change of body image difficulties and disorders. The contents of this handbook make it clear that body image transcends a singular experience. It is complex and multidimensional. It is gendered. It is ethnic and cultural. It is age dependent. It depends on the state of the body and the state of the mind. Much has been learned since the first edition of this handbook was published in 2002. Much remains to be learned.

Informative Readings

This chapter identifies numerous scholarly works on body image over the past century. The references below include some of the most recent reference sources:

- Cash, T. F. (2004). Body image: Past, present, and future (editorial). *Body Image: An International Journal of Research*, 1, 1–5.—Provides the editor's perspective on the field for the journal's inaugural issue, which includes nine review articles on core topics about body image.
- Fisher, S. (1990). The evolution of psychological concepts about the body. In T. F. Cash & T. Pruzinsky (Eds.), *Body images: Development, deviance and change* (pp. 3–20). New York: Guilford Press.—An excellent historical view of the body image construct from an influential scholar in the field.
- Grogan, S. (2008). *Body image: Understanding body dissatisfaction in men, women, and children* (2nd ed.). East Sussex, UK: Routledge.—Offers an extensive and detailed overview of the field.
- Rumsey, N., & Harcourt, D. (2005). *The psychology of appearance*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.—A review of human appearance and body image with a particular focus on visible differences.
- Sarwer, D. B., Pruzinsky, T., Cash, T. F., Goldwyn, R. M., Persing, J. A., & Whitaker, L. A. (Eds.). (2006). *Psychological aspects of reconstructive and cosmetic plastic surgery: Clinical, empirical, and ethical perspectives*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, Williams and Wilkins.—Provides an integrated consideration of body image in relation to reconstructive and cosmetic surgery.
- Shontz, F. C. (1990). Body image and physical disability. In T. F. Cash & T. Pruzinsky (Eds.), *Body images: Development, deviance, and change* (pp. 149–169). New York: Guilford Press.—Summarizes the history of body image concepts and their application to physical disabilities.
- Smolak, L., & Thompson, J. K. (Eds.). (2009). *Body image, eating disorders, and obesity in youth: Assessment, prevention, and treatment* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.—Details research literatures on body image in relation to eating disorders and obesity among children and adolescents.
- Thompson, J. K. (Ed.). (2004). *Handbook of eating disorders and obesity*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.—An extensive volume on eating disorders and obesity with an integral consideration of body image.
- Thompson, J. K., & Cafri, G. (Eds.). (2007). *The muscular ideal: Psychological, social, and*

medical perspectives. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.— Considers how cultural and personal ideals and pursuits of a muscular physique affect men (and some women).

Veale, D., & Neziroglu, F. (2010). *Body dysmorphic disorder: A treatment manual*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.—A volume that integrates theory and science on body dysmorphic disorder and delineates the elements of treatment.

Copyright © 2011 The Guilford Press