



Understanding body dissatisfaction among older men: A qualitative study

Shweta Linga Reddy, Texas Christian University

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## Introduction

Body image is a multifaceted psychological experience of embodiment that includes one's physical appearance, body related self-perceptions and self-attitudes such as thoughts, beliefs, feelings and behaviors (Cash, 2004, p.1). McCabe & Ricciardelli (2004) observe that in the case of adult men the importance of appearance relates not only to what they look like, but also to their health, fitness and general wellbeing. Prior studies have indicated that body image assessment in men relates to a desire for increased muscularity and reduced body fat (Nowell & Ricciardelli, 2008) which is different from women's desire for weight loss. Studies have shown that in comparison to men, women report a lower Body Mass Index (BMI) as the „ideal,“ and women are more likely than men to perceive themselves as overweight even if they are of normal weight (Kiefer, Leitner, Bauer & Rieder, 2000). However, men are more likely to consider themselves as normal weight even if they are overweight.

Body dissatisfaction (BD) is the negative outcome of an individual's evaluation of their body shape, weight or body parts (Presnell, Bearman, & Stice, 2004). Thus, it is defined as an individual's dissatisfaction with his/her specific body attributes or overall appearance. Studies investigating BD have mostly focused on women and thereby have typically addressed the strategies used to lose weight, but questions regarding gaining weight or increasing muscles have not been assessed (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). Studies that have investigated men's body image are limited to men in the age range of 18-21 years (Ricciardelli & McCabe 2003). In an attempt to understand older men's body image and body dissatisfaction experiences, the present study utilized qualitative methodology to gather rich data from men over the age of 50 years.

## Method

The body-image experiences of men were investigated using semi-structured interviews conducted with men in the age range of 52 to 71 years. The respondents were contacted via the center established by the university to promote research relevant to the topic of Aging. Among the 8 male respondents, 7 respondents described their ethnicity as White/ Caucasian American and 1 Asian. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and eventually sorted to retrieve only appearance related aspects from the interviewees' accounts. Each transcribed interview was examined independently to sort the appearance relevant narratives. A qualitative research technique known as „narrative inquiry“ was used to conduct this study (Bell, 2002). In narrative analysis „the story or the narrative“ is the object of investigation with an objective to understand how the respondents make sense of the events and experiences in their lives.

## Results

A careful analysis of each of the transcripts was performed in order to separate the narratives into themes. The interviews suggest that one of the more common causes of body

dissatisfaction among men is the lack of height and weight. Narratives reflective of this theme included “I didn’t like the fact that I wasn’t tall. I was short and squatty like a fireplug. I wanted to be six feet tall...I wasn’t and I am not”. The responses further suggest that men’s attitudes and behaviors towards appearance are influenced by feedback from parents, wives and strangers. Comments supportive of this theme included: “My mother was much more concerned of my appearance than I was”, “I knew I used to look pretty good based on how people responded and told me” and “My wife tries to help. If I was left to my own devices...nah!”

The findings also revealed that men consciously engage in activities to improve their appearance; for example, dressing in a color flattering to their skin color or accessorizing to add a dash of color to their overall attire. Although some men did not agree with the use of cosmetic procedures to improve one’s appearance, others were comfortable with the idea of using cosmetic treatment to mask the effects of aging. A dominant „not looking old“ theme emerged. Some respondents took pride in looking younger than the general expectation of individuals their age. Other respondents felt disappointed by others’ perception of them as an „old man“. From the responses of all eight interviewees, it was clear that all respondents made an effort to keep themselves physically active to maintain their overall health and physical fitness. Seven out of eight respondents claimed to have an active lifestyle and considered health of foremost importance.

The findings of the present study cannot be generalized because the sample was non-representative, consisting of a small sample of men within a limited age-range. Moreover, participants were men who chose to discuss the topic of appearance and/or body dissatisfaction (BD) voluntarily. Thus, these respondents may have systematically differed from other men who were invited but did not take part in this study.

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