Body Image: past, present, and future

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Abstract
This brief editorial article introduces the new scientific journal, *Body Image: An International Journal of Research*, and describes its rationale and mission in relation to the history and future of the study of body image and human appearance.

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A personal welcome

With great pleasure, as the founding Editor-in-Chief, I welcome you to the inaugural issue of our new peer-reviewed, scientific publication—*Body Image: An International Journal of Research*. This scholarly vehicle has been my vision for many years, for reasons that I will elucidate in this editorial introduction. The evolution of this journal reflects an ever-expanding field of scientific inquiry into the profound as well as subtle meanings of human embodiment. Plato once insightfully remarked that “we are bound to our bodies like an oyster is to its shell.” Indeed, our life experiences are integrally influenced by the body we happen to live in.

My own professional awakening to this field came 30 years ago in writing my doctoral dissertation. It initiated my decade of research on what I call the “outside view” of human appearance (Cash, 1990)—how does what we look like “on the outside” affect our lives? I studied the social stereotyping of and behavioral reactions to physical appearance (especially measured “physical attractiveness”) in a range of contexts, from first impressions, to friendship formation, dating and mating, and employment opportunities. I learned that appearance matters, often in complex ways (see Bull & Rumsey, 1988; Cash, 1990; Etcoff, 1999; Jackson, 1992; Patzer, 1985). However, I also learned that individuals’ own subjective experiences of their appearance were often even more psychosocially powerful than the objective or social “reality” of their appearance.

This self-perception I termed the “inside view” (Cash, 1990), which is “body image.” Body image refers to the multifaceted psychological experience of embodiment, especially but not exclusively one’s physical appearance. As I have written on more than one occasion, “body image is body images” (Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990, p. xi). It encompasses one’s body-related self-perceptions and self-attitudes, in-
cluding thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors. This fascinating phenomenon has attracted my scientific curiosity and professional devotion for 20 years. The literature attests that both basic and applied scientific research on body image has grown steadily over the last half century, with impressive escalation during recent decades. For example, searches of PsycINFO’s and PubMed’s databases for articles pertaining to body image or body (dis)satisfaction yielded 726 and 1250 citations, respectively, from the 1970s, 1428 and 1785 citations from the 1980s, and 2477 and 2766 citations from the 1990s (Pruzinsky & Cash, 2002).

Looking back

As conveyed in the volume Body Image: A Handbook of Theory, Research, and Clinical Practice (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002a), the field has a fascinating history and is evolving in intriguing directions (Pruzinsky & Cash, 2002). Nearly a century ago, a recognition of “body image” or “body schema” began with clinical attempts to understand neuropathological forms of body experience, including such phenomena as “phantom limb,” “autotopagnosia,” “hemiasomatognosia,” and “anosognosia” (see Fisher, 1990). During the first half of the 20th century, Schilder (1935/1950) emerged as the scholar who “almost single-handedly upgraded the study of body experience, taking it beyond a parochial focus on the distorted perceptions induced by brain damage” (Fisher, 1990, p. 7). Subsequently, eminent psychologist Seymour Fisher devoted much of his career to studying body image from a psychoanalytic perspective, prolifically publishing books and scientific papers on the “body boundary” construct (Fisher, 1970, 1986; Fisher & Cleveland, 1968). Concurrently, Franklin Shontz (1969), who was critical of the psychodynamic viewpoint, sought to integrate theory and data from various areas of experimental psychology, regarded body experience as multi-dimensional, and applied scientific findings to understand and help persons with physical disabilities (Shontz, 1990).

Considering the present

In recent years, clinical psychology and psychiatry have dominated the study of body image, particularly investigations and applications pertaining to eating disorders among young women. These professional pursuits have produced profound and useful knowledge (see Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002a; Thompson, 1996, 2004; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1998; Thompson & Smolak, 2001). Indeed, this popular area of research has served as an important catalyst for body image research in other areas. However, it has also reinforced the limiting notion that body image is only relevant to girls and women, and only concerns body weight and shape. I firmly believe that the field must build upon yet transcend this narrow focus and capture the rich diversity of human experiences of embodiment. Substantial, exciting work is happening in other areas of psychology, in other social and behavioral sciences, and in numerous medical and allied health fields (see Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002a). For example, acquired physical diseases or injuries (e.g., cancers, HIV/AIDS, skin diseases, or burns) and their treatments can dramatically change the functioning and appearance of the body, which in turn can alter the person’s body image and psychosocial well-being, for better or worse, in everyday life. Experiences and conditions of embodiment have far-reaching effects on human development and the quality of life.

This transcendence of the concept of body image beyond its most common applications into ever-widening contexts of human experience is the central vision of our new journal. Its mission is to expand and integrate body image erudition in ways that advance science and its application. For years, many colleagues and I have been thwarted by the fact that no single publication outlet exists for the rapidly growing scholarship on body image and human appearance. The research is ultimately found in scores of journals across a range of disciplines, specialties, and nationalities. In the evaluation of my proposal for this journal, our publisher Elsevier conducted database searches and discovered that publications were widely dispersed. Only one journal published more than 5% of extant articles over a recent period and dozens of journals each published an occasional few papers. Thus, the dissemination and integration of knowledge regarding body image is diffuse and “homeless.” The time is ripe for an interdisciplinary and international professional journal that publishes ideas and evidence about the psychosocial significance of embodied human experience. I believe that our building a home
for this field will serve the synergy of creating and communicating knowledge and its helpful application.

Looking forward

In the concluding chapter of our edited Body Image Handbook, we (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002b) delineated and discussed the themes and future directions conveyed by the contributing authors of the preceding 56 chapters. Although I will not attempt to reiterate our many observations here, these directive themes are represented in the journal’s “Aims and Scope.” Body Image welcomes the submission of original research articles, brief research articles, theoretical and review papers, and science-based practitioner reports on the following topics (listed in no particular order of priority):

- The effects of specific physical characteristics (e.g., body size, attractiveness, physical disfigurements or other appearance-altering conditions) on body image, psychological functioning, interpersonal processes, and quality of life.
- Physical appearance and body image in diverse cultural contexts (e.g., cross-cultural or ethnic studies), including the “culture” of gender.
- Physical appearance and body image in the full range of medical and allied health contexts (e.g., cosmetic and reconstructive surgery, dental medicine, dermatology, endocrinology, neurology, nursing, obstetrics and gynecology, physical therapy, rehabilitation medicine, urology, etc.).
- Validation of new and existing assessments of specific aspects of the multidimensional body image construct (e.g., body image “trait” assessments, contextual measures, assessments pertinent to specific physical or psychological conditions, culturally sensitive measures, etc.).
- Factors that influence positive and negative body image development across the life span (i.e., risk factors and protective factors).
- Adaptive and maladaptive body image processes and their clinically relevant consequences on psychosocial functioning and quality of life (e.g., “positive body image” and body image psychopathology in relation to eating disorders, body dysmorphic disorder, social phobia, mood disorders, etc.).
- The relationship of body image to behavioral variables (e.g., exercise and other physical activity, eating and weight-control behaviors, grooming and appearance-modifying behaviors, social behaviors, etc.).
- Systematic scientific evaluation of interventions to promote positive body image or to prevent or treat negative body image (e.g., outcome studies of body image therapies and primary and secondary prevention programs).
- Conceptual contributions to the field from a range of theoretical perspectives (e.g., behavioral, cognitive, evolutionary, feminist, phenomenological, psychodynamic, sociocultural, etc.).

An additional unique feature of Body Image is its plan to recognize incipient scholars in a section of the journal that publishes abstracts of recent doctoral dissertations in the field, with an online availability of more detailed summaries. The journal wishes to encourage scholarship among each new generation of scientists. Body Image will annually recognize the “Outstanding Body Image Dissertation” with a monetary award and honor in the name of the late Dr. Seymour Fisher, whose aforementioned contributions to this field were both seminal and prolific. Dr. Tom Pruzinsky, who originated the idea to publish these abstracts and bestow an award, will be the Associate Editor in charge of this feature of the journal. We will have further information about this on our website and in future issues.

Body Image’s promise of excellence is certainly evident in its Associate Editors and the members of its Editorial Board. In founding this publication, I was inspired by the enthusiasm that these experienced colleagues expressed for its development. The journal’s highly respected Associate Editors are active decision-makers in processing submitted manuscripts. We call upon over 40 international Editorial Board members (as well as other experts) to provide knowledgeable, constructive, and timely reviews of submitted papers. As you read the names of our prominent Associate Editors and Editorial Board members, you will appreciate the depth and diversity of their expertise, which mirrors our journal’s mission.

Let me mention a few other attractive features of Body Image. Online submission is available and en-
couraged. It is very efficient and user-friendly. Simply visit our informative website at http://www.elsevier.com/locate/bodyimage. We provide detailed guidelines for preparing a paper for submission as well as step-by-step instructions for electronic submission. Our peer review process is electronic also, which saves considerable time relative to the postal mailing of paper around the world. You can track your paper from acceptance through publication. Furthermore, weeks in advance of the publication of the hard-copy journal, in-press papers are conveniently available online to ScienceDirect® subscribers. Also well in advance of publication of each issue, its table of contents is sent to requestors who register for Elsevier’s free e-mail alerting service—ContentsDirect. Finally, the journal does not assess page charges, and the publisher provides 25 offprints gratis to the lead author.

Our inaugural issue

This first issue of Body Image consists of nine invited articles that nicely illustrate the journal’s broad scope. In his article, Dr. Thompson elucidates issues of body image assessment by identifying common conceptual, methodological, and psychometric pitfalls and by offering practical guidance in avoiding them. Dr. Smolak insightfully reviews what we know and do not know (but need to discover) about body image development during childhood and adolescence. Dr. Tiggemann thoughtfully addresses the unfolding body image experiences during a seemingly forgotten developmental period—adulthood. Drs. Schwartz and Brownell present an enlightening examination of the complexities of body image experiences among overweight and obese persons. Drs. Levine and Piran contribute an instructive review of the tenets and effectiveness of interventions based on three models for the prevention of negative body image and eating disorders. Dr. Pruzinsky’s visionary article speaks to the significance of body image and its proper assessment and rehabilitation in enhancing the quality of life among a broad spectrum of medical patients. Drs. Rumsey and Harcourt provide a thought-provoking and caring treatise on body image issues and changes among persons with congenital or acquired visible disfigurements. Dr. Sarwer and Ms. Cerand offer an informed inspection of the roles of certain body image dimensions in persons’ pursuit of cosmetic surgical and medical treatments and on the body image impact of such procedures. Finally, Dr. Veale adeptly articulates a multi-faceted cognitive-behavioral model for improving the understanding and treatment of body dysmorphic disorder.

I sincerely hope that you will find our first issue to be edifying. I cordially invite your continued consideration of Body Image: An International Journal of Research as a means of learning about and contributing to the further development of this fascinating and evolving field.

References

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