The Impact of Body Image Preoccupation on College Adjustment

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Overview

- The physical and psychological adjustment to college is often a disorienting time for students. Upon entering college, students are met with a new set of societal, personal, and academic expectations that decide the degree to which they are able to adapt to their new lives (Tinto, 1993).
- Given the taxing mental demands associated with the college transition, as well as the increasing prevalence of mental illnesses among college students (Duarte, Ferreira, Trindade, & Pinto-Gouveia, 2015; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010), extensive research has examined the many psychological components that can affect students’ college experiences.
- Yet, despite the extensive literatures centering around body image preoccupation and college students’ psychological health/adjustment to college, there have been no studies that assess body image alongside college adjustment.
- The present study aims to fill this gap in the literature by examining the association of body image preoccupation and students’ adjustment to college.

Data Analyses

- All data were analyzed using SPSS. First, we conducted univariate analyses (ANOVA) to examine the relationship between students’ levels of body image preoccupation and overall college adjustment (hypothesis 1). Median splits were used to designate “high” vs. “low” levels of body image preoccupation. See Table 1.
- To further explore this relationship, we utilized multiple linear regression analyses to further examine the extent to which body image preoccupation predicts negative college adjustment (hypothesis 2). See Table 2.
- Controls for body image, race, age, and club participation were also included to more precisely trace the total predictive effect of body image preoccupation on college adjustment (Mayhew et al., 2016).
- Analyses were stratified by gender, resulting in separate multiple regressions for men and women. See Tables 3 and 4.

Results

- Hypothesis 1 – Participants with higher levels of body image preoccupation (score > 17) reported lower overall college adjustment (F(2, 143) = 19.941, p < .000). See Tables 1 and 2.
- Hypothesis 2 – Gender differences. Data were analyzed comparatively by gender. A significant regression equation was found for men (F(4, 34) = 2.86, p < .038), and women (F(4, 88) = 5.85, p < .00). Body image preoccupation was a significant predictor of negative college adjustment for both models: Men (b = .85, CI=.02, 1.67, p < .044); Women (b = .47, CI=.25, .69, p < .00). See Tables 3 and 4, respectively.

Purpose

- The present study aimed to further the empirical knowledge base on college transitions and adjustment by exploring the relationship between body image preoccupation and college adjustment.
- This study also sought to enrich the literature on body image preoccupation by tying the phenomenon to a widely researched psychological phenomenon in college adjustment.
- Given that body image issues are both historically and empirically tied more so to women than men (Cook & Hausenblas, 2011; Paap & Gardner, 2011), this study also serves to explore the effects of body image on college adjustment comparatively based on gender.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between body image preoccupation and students’ overall adjustment to college?
2. Are preoccupations with body image more detrimental to college adjustment for women?

Hypotheses

1. Higher levels of body image preoccupation will be associated with lower overall adjustment to college.
2. Body image preoccupation will act as a predictor to negative college adjustment, and will do so to a higher degree in women than in men.

Implications

- The present study provides further evidence that psychological difficulties such as body image preoccupation can impact students’ adjustment to college.
- This study expands and connects two separate knowledge bases by connecting body image issues to college student adjustment.
- Higher education and student affairs personnel must be mindful of the many pervasive psychological influences that may impact the students with whom they work.

Conclusions

- Body image does play an important role in impacting how both men and women adjust to college.
- Body image may be an important factor in future interventions addressing college adjustment.