

UVM ScholarWorks

In the Looking Glass: An Examination of Body Image and Identity Development Through Research and Poetry

Item Type	article
Authors	Carlson, Melissa;Kiemele, Rachel
Download date	2026-06-12 01:56:06
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14849/9579

In the Looking Glass: An Examination of Body Image and Identity Development Through Research and Poetry

Melissa Carlson & Rachel Kiemele

Abstract

College students in the United States have been feeling the pressure to conform to societal standards of beauty for generations, as evidenced by the wealth of body image studies that began to take shape in the 1970s (Lowery et al., 2005). Researchers have focused on the way media and advertising affect body image, yet have largely ignored the relationship between body image and identity development. There has been significant research completed on body image as a whole. However, there is a need for further research to explore the link between a student's perception of their body and their sense of self. These elements play a crucial part in shaping the identities of students and, consequently, their experiences. This paper will explore the research that has been completed on body image as well as the possible connection to student identity development.

Note: Interspersed between sections, we will be including a poem that reflects the common struggle of embracing body positivity and overcoming negative body image ideals. In what stands to be a scientific and structured article, we want to emphasize, honor, and explore the reality of this struggle in the hopes of making this piece both more accessible and more impactful for a greater audience.

Melissa Carlson took a non-traditional path to higher education. As a child growing up on the road, Melissa left the classroom at ten years old and did not return until after almost a decade of traveling. She recently graduated from the University of Vermont with a master's degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration and is currently working at Champlain College in Burlington, VT.

Rachel Kiemele is a first year graduate student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration program at the University of Vermont. She earned her B.A. in English with a focus in Poetry and a minor in Women's Studies from Colorado State University in 2011. A returner to the academy, she spent the last four years studying best practices for caffeine consumption as a supervisor for Starbucks Coffee.

In the United States, 15-20% of adults are obese; this fact has fueled a desire in many researchers to uncover how body size affects body image (Cash & Green, 1986). The subjective nature of body image makes it an elusive subject for researchers to measure. Rucker and Cash (1992) stated that “body image has long been a difficult construct to define, hindered in part by faulty assumptions of unidimensionality and equivalence of measures” (p. 291), that is to say, there is far more to body image than physical size. Rucker and Cash have designated two distinct components that make up body image. The first of these is perceptual body image, or an individual’s estimation of the size of their body. This estimation is subjective and can be influenced by a variety of factors, such as society’s idealized standards. The second is attitudinal body image, or a person’s manner and behaviors as related to their body size (Rucker & Cash, 1992). The two discrete aspects of body image disturbance are similarly subjective. Body-size distortion, characterized by an inability to accurately assess one’s own size, and body dissatisfaction can be influenced by body size, body image, and societal ideals (Keeton & Brown, 1990).

Despite its complex make-up, body image has been described as, “the picture of our own body which we form in our mind . . . [it is] the way in which the body appears to ourselves” (Lowery, 2005, p. 612). Studies dealing specifically in perceptual and attitudinal body image, as well as body-size distortion and dissatisfaction, have made an effort to define which factors or variables impact how we build these images. Researchers have focused on a number of variables, including, but not limited to sex, gender, sexual orientation, race, psychological and physical well-being, and family dynamics. Student affairs professionals will note that the list of variables explored in relation to body image are almost identical to those that impact student identity development. The overlap of factors between two distinct areas of study (i.e., body image and student identity development), both dedicated to exploring the nuances of self-perception, indicates a possible correlation between the two and necessitates further exploration. Due to time and length constraints, the studies detailed in this paper were selected according to three criteria: the selected participants were college students, their demographics represented at least one of the overlapping variables between body image and student identity development, and the research focused on the distinct aspects of body image and body image disturbance. As such, this paper serves as an introduction and broad exploration of the correlation between body image and student identity development to establish the need for further research. The selected studies do not take into account every aspect of identity that could influence body image.

*mirror, mirror
on the wall
WHO
is the harshest critic of them all?
I don't measure up, you see,
to a (perfect?) 39:18:33...*

The Relationship between Body Image and Body Weight

Body Image and Female Identity Development

In their study of perceptual body image, Cash and Green (1986) required all participants to complete a questionnaire to establish demographics and a baseline according to the following factors: “age, sex, point in menstrual cycle, height, current weight, and weight history (maximum and minimum weights; typical weights in childhood and adolescence; and weight stability in childhood, adolescence, and in the last three months)” (p. 294). During the second phase of the research study, participants were divided into categories based on their questionnaire responses and were asked to estimate their body size (Cash & Green, 1986). The researchers projected lines of light onto a wall approximately six feet away; participants adjusted the beams of light to match their estimated width of a specific body part. Using this method, participants were asked to estimate the size of the following body zones: the width of their face, chest, waist, hips, and thighs at their respective widest points (Cash & Green, 1986). After appraising each area of their bodies, participants were asked to rate themselves on a scale ranging from below the perceived average physical dimension for their age, height, and gender to above the average. The study concluded with the participants completing the same assessment for a mannequin.

Cash and Green (1986) discovered that most participants overestimated the size of the mannequin but were relatively accurate in estimations of their own body size. However, those who were classified as underweight were far more likely to overestimate the size of the mannequin. As Cash and Green (1986) stated, “size estimations of one’s own body were strongly related to size estimations of another’s body (here, a mannequin’s) but were largely independent of the subjective appraisals of the normativeness of one’s body” (p. 298). Moreover, it was evident from the questionnaire results that the participants’ dissatisfaction with their body weight was a strong predictor of their overall body satisfaction (Cash & Green, 1986). This correlation is especially important to further investigate when viewed in conjunction with the role that self-esteem and body image have in the identity development of college-aged females. Usmiani and Daniluk (1997) conducted a study that explored the relationship between self-

esteem, gender role identity, and body image among mothers and their pre- and menarcheal daughters.

Other findings have revealed a complicated relationship between body image and female identity development in relation to family dynamics (Usmiani & Daniluk, 1997). Specifically, this study focused on how the relationship between mother and daughter changes when the daughter is pre- versus post-menstrual. Finally, the researchers examined how changes in body size wrought by menarche and the influence and attitudes of their families impacted young females' body image. Usmiani and Daniluk (1997) based their study on the substantial body of literature, which asserts that, "[post-menarcheal] girls in particular are extremely conscious of their changing bodies and roles, and frequently report dissatisfaction with their appearance" (p. 47). The researchers further supported this overarching theme in their observation of menarcheal daughters' and their mothers', "preoccupation with eating and body size and clothes" (Usmiani & Daniluk, 1997, p. 47). They attributed this preoccupation to a daughter's understanding that "one's life as a woman must inevitably reflect upon the life of one's mother" (pp. 47-48), as a young girl's first role model of what it means to be female and a woman is her mother. If this is the case, then it begs the question: who is modeling what it means to be a female and a woman for girls whose mothers are not involved in their lives?

Usmiani and Daniluk (1997) attempted to answer this question and asserted that body image is "formed to a degree as a function of the culturally defined images of desirable bodily appearances for men and women" (p. 47). This means that a part of female identity development is inextricably linked to learning how one's female adult body will function within society. Although a girl's mother may be the most readily available role model, the mother will not be the only one as these messages are a function of our culture and therefore widely accessible. Usmiani and Daniluk (1997) reinforced the idea that a young female's understanding of her body is based on both her physical characteristics and a thoroughly subjective experience and evaluation of those characteristics. That is to say, a young female does not and cannot make meaning of the physical changes that accompany menarche from within a vacuum devoid of societal ideals and expectations. This is because physical changes can impact body image on both perceptual and attitudinal levels. This indicates a need to look more closely at how the distinct facets of body image, both exception and attitude, contribute to self-esteem within the context of female identity development.

Although researchers have been unable to concretely define the direction of the relationship between self-esteem and body image, whether body image satisfaction positively affects self-esteem or vice versa has not been concluded. However, it is clear that young females experience high rates of body image

dissatisfaction and poor self-esteem during adolescence and menarche. During this time, physical changes such as weight gain (up to a 30% increase in body fat) manifest and young girls are confronted with changing expectations from their mothers, families, and society that are closely tied to how their female bodies should appear as they transition into womanhood (Usmiani & Daniluk, 1997). Usmiani and Daniluk (1997) found that pre- and post-menstrual females initially begin receiving culturally defined body image images from their families, specifically their mothers, as a result of learning how they “measure up” as women in relation to their family’s expectations; such measurements necessarily include assessment of their physical bodies (Usmiani & Daniluk, 1997, p. 48). This means that the way young women learn to perceive their bodies is intrinsically linked to the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction they feel in relation to the physicality of their bodies, which in turn is connected to their levels of self-esteem.

Complications of Intersectionality and Study Limitations

Usmiani and Daniluk (1997) suggested multiple and varying correlations between self-esteem, gender role identity, and body image. These correlations emphasized the need to examine how female body image and identity development are linked, specifically in relation to cultural and societal standards for female bodies. Usmiani and Daniluk (1997) began to uncover the complex relationship that exists between body image and identity development within the context of family dynamics. This highlights the necessity of addressing the intersectional nature of identity in hopes to fully understand these complex linkages and how they impact individual perception. The researchers acknowledged that their study did not consider the role racial and socioeconomic differences played in identity development. Furthermore, their results strengthened the overarching cultural expectation that female identity development is synonymous with gender identity development, i.e. that females will be women, and does not account for the separation of sex and gender. It reinforces the idea that a crucial part of gender role development for women is the integration of their bodies’ physical changes during menarche with society’s expectations of gender-appropriate behavior and appearance (Cash & Green, 1986). In other words, if a person is female-bodied (i.e., they display all the physical characteristics associated with having two X chromosomes), then society subjects them to a culturally created expectation to be a woman. Therefore bodies and our perceptions of them are exceedingly difficult to divorce from identity development.

In their study, Cash and Green (1986) discovered that the participants who internalized society’s standard “thin ideal”, or the valuing below-average body weight and appearance, tended to judge themselves and others in relation to this “thin ideal.” The study also revealed that participants who lost a significant amount of weight or who were recovering from anorexia showed considerable

signs of body image distortion even after reaching a medically certified healthy body size (Cash & Green, 1986). Each of these studies has increased the awareness regarding body size issues as they relate to body image. However, their findings introduced more questions than answers if the goal is to delineate how different variables influence and construct body image and identity development. Finally, Usmiani and Daniluk (1997) in particular raise an additional body of questions regarding the relationship between female identity and gender role development that significantly broadened our understanding of the wide-ranging effects of body image on the female psyche.

*Bust, waist, and hips
I do possess,
yet still
YOU dare
profess disinterest?*

Gender Differences in Body Image

Several years after Cash and Green's (1986) research study, Keeton, Cash, and Brown (1990) sought to clearly define body image and its individual components in men and women. In contrast to previous studies, Keeton et al. (1990) felt that utilizing lines of light as a way to estimate body size, and consequently body image, was responsible for the "inconsistent findings in the eating disorders literature" (p. 214). Unique to this study, Keeton et al. (1990), asked participants to stand in front of a mirror and rate their level of discomfort; they termed this technique mirror-image confrontation.

Keeton et al. (1990) recruited a pool of 125 participants consisting of 47 men and 78 women. Participants were then asked to complete the Body-Self Relations Questionnaire, which included 140 questions related to their self-image (Keeton et al., 1990). Following the completion of the questionnaire, participants took part in the mirror-image confrontation activity that required them to look at themselves in the mirror for thirty seconds and then rate their level of comfort or discomfort. The study concluded with participants rating their bodies in comparison to their peers in terms of assumed gender, weight, and sex.

Keeton et al. (1990) discovered that, on average, men perceive their bodies as smaller than the ideal. This discrepancy may be the result of the increasing pressure for men to conform to a muscular body ideal that has been prevalent since the 1970s and has led to an increase in body dissatisfaction among men (Lowery et al., 2005). Conversely, female participants in the study viewed their bodies as larger than the ideal, had greater body image distortion, and often

created silhouettes that were larger than their actual size (Keeton et al., 1990). However, the authors did not find a direct correlation between overestimation of body size and a negative body image, unlike Cash and Green (1986), which had observed a link between the two. In comparison, it was discovered that, “body-image concerns for men are complicated by a generally negative meaning of thinness plus mixed implications of heaviness” (Keeton et al., 1990, p. 226). The authors also found that the participant pool that consisted of men had mixed perceptions of the ideal weight, with half expressing they wished to be smaller and the other half wishing to have a larger physique. These findings have increased significance when comparing them to Edward and Jones’s (2009) study of the gender identity development of college men.

Edward and Jones (2009) found that college-aged men developed their gender identity in part through “constant interaction with society’s expectations of them as men” (p. 210). Amongst the list of perceived expectations were: strong, tough, competitive, and aggressive. These expectations may be at the root of the muscular body ideal that has become pervasive in American culture (Lowery et al., 2005).

Body Image and Mental Health

Keeton et al. (1990) also found that, “subjects who reported feeling less attractive, more dissatisfied with their bodies and their body weight, and more anxious viewing themselves in a mirror” (p. 227) were also more likely to display groups of symptoms associated with overarching psychological disorders. This demonstrates a link between poor body image and psychological disorder. However, that perceived body size is as strong a factor as actual body size in creating poor body image highlights how body image as a whole is “hardly a simple, unidimensional construct” (Keeton et al., 1990, p. 224). The implication that body image has a significant impact on mental health and well-being points to a need for research on how psychological stressors and their root causes influence a student’s identity development.

*Harshest critic hanging there
on the wall, this dress is too tight,
your measuring stick,
too small.*

Racial Differences in Body Image Maintenance and Determination

In 1992, Clifford Rucker and Thomas Cash brought together a participant pool that consisted of 104 Black and White female college students to explore the role that race plays in body image. From previous research, the authors were aware there was a lower occurrence of eating disorders within Black populations and in non-Western societies that either value or do not stigmatize “plumpness” (Rucker & Cash, 1992, p. 291). Moving into the study, Rucker and Cash (1992) hypothesized that

- (1) Black women’s body-image attitudes, especially those related to weight will be less disparaging.
 - (2) Black women will be less fearful of fatness and less driven toward thinness, as reflected in both attitudes and eating behaviors.
 - (3) Black women will espouse more moderate perceptual ideals that are less discrepant from their self-perceived body size.
 - (4) Finally, black women’s perceptions of body sizes will evince higher thresholds for judgments of fatness.
- (p. 292)

Their hypotheses stemmed from the assumption that Black individuals on average have less stringent views of the ideal body size and dimensions than their White counterparts.

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire that included 69 questions that addressed body-self relation (Rucker & Cash, 1992). Following the questionnaire, participants completed a “Perceptions of Fatness Procedure” that was developed specifically for the study. The procedure consisted of participants rating silhouettes of physiques based on thinness or fatness as well as choosing an ideal body shape (Rucker & Cash, 1992).

Rucker and Cash (1992) revealed that White female participants consistently desired to be thinner than their Black peers, as exhibited by the discovery that White women consistently selected a thinner silhouette as the ideal body size. They also uncovered that, “compared with [B]lack, [W]hite women reported greater fear of fatness, a stronger drive to be thin, more dieting concerns, overweight preoccupation, great weight fluctuation awareness, and higher weigh-in anxiety” (Rucker & Cash, 1992, p. 296). The authors summarized by stating that women who identified as Black were much more likely to have a positive body image and were less desiring of thinness than their White peers.

As Rucker and Cash pointed out, if their study is generalized to the Black female community as a whole, an acceptance of a larger body size ideal may come as a double-edged sword. Although resistance to the internalization of

thin standards of beauty may lower the predisposition for anorexia and bulimia nervosa, cultivating attitudes more tolerant of greater-than-average weight may also heighten the risk for obesity, mortality, and morbidity (Rucker & Cash, 1992). The authors also noted that the research demonstrated that the Black female participants did not idealize fatness; they were just not fat-phobic (Rucker & Cash, 1992).

These data contributed significantly to the study of body image in terms of racial difference, yet gaps in the research remain. Rucker and Cash (1992) did not address the full scope of possible racial differences in body image because their study focused solely on participants who identified as Black or White. While researching ethnic identity development, Phinney (1989) found that there were several key issues that needed to be resolved in order for individuals to achieve identity resolution. For young Black women, the most salient issue in their interviews was, “the realization that White standards of beauty (especially hair and skin color) did not apply to them” (Phinney, 1989, p. 44). It is apparent that the ways in which an individual’s body image and race intersects with their identity development is undeniably complicated and profound.

*Your glass
is cracked,
the image
unclear,
I can't
see myself
reflected
here.*

Implications for Student Affairs Personnel

The research surrounding body image has evolved to take intersecting identities into consideration; nevertheless, the available data that link this topic with identity development theory are lacking especially in light of significant overlap between the factors most often associated with body image and those attributed to identity development (e.g., sex, gender, sexual orientation, race, psychological and physical well-being, and family dynamics). Student affairs personnel are concerned with the multiplicity of factors that can support or detract from student success, and they often make use of research that addresses the implications of college student risk taking, drinking behaviors, race, gender, and ethnicity on identity development (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). However, there is no such body of work to rely on in regard to body image. Grogan and Richards’ (2002) work highlighted the necessity of further research. They ascertained that there is a positive correlation between body image and confidence. Additionally, Evans et al. (2010) pointed out, “with regard to academic factors, confidence

has been shown to be significantly correlated with academic satisfaction and classroom performance” (p. 76). Researchers have focused on examining the factors that contribute to both identity development and body image individually, but have yet to define and determine the nature of the correlations between body image, body size, self-esteem, sex and gender identity, family dynamics, race, and confidence that have emerged. Delving deeper into the relationship between body image and college student identity development will give student affairs personnel a greater depth of knowledge surrounding the factors that affect, and ultimately create, students’ sense of self. Understanding how students both create and are impacted by their sense of self can only aid in the mission of fostering student success.

Conclusion

Research has demonstrated the critical role that body image plays in an individual’s sense of self, especially if his or her body image is negative. If a relationship between body image and student identity development becomes apparent through further research, it will be crucial for student affairs practitioners to be aware of how body image intersects with identity development. Moving forward, there is an opportunity for further exploration of how body image perceptions shape identity formation and whether body ideals are a barrier or contributor to identity development. Furthermore, there is an opportunity for longitudinal studies to examine how body image changes over time, specifically from the first year through the senior year of college. Finally, there are a number of identities that, due to space and time constraints, have not been addressed in this paper but which are known to impact identity development, including but not limited to sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status.

Despite the wide-ranging questions that the studies discussed here pose and the even broader array of answers they present, one thing is clear: body image is a complex and multifaceted issue that lies at the center of multiple intersections of identity. Like a kaleidoscope that continually fractures into differing brilliant patterns, viewing body image through the lens of identity presents new questions and connections at each turn. Gaining an ultimately clearer picture of oneself requires looking past our physical reflections to the heart of why we perceive our bodies and ourselves in such myriad ways: it requires taking a journey through the looking glass.

Dimensions

mirror, mirror
on the wall
who
is the harshest critic of all?
I don't measure up, you see,
to a (perfect?) 39:18:33...
Bust, waist, and hips
I do possess,
yet still
you dare
profess disinterest?
Harshest critic hanging there
on the wall, this dress is too tight
your measuring stick,
too small.
Your glass
is cracked,
the image
unclear,
I can't
see myself
reflected
here.

References

- Akan, G. E., & Grilo, C. M. (1995). Sociocultural influences on eating attitudes and behaviors, body image, and psychological functioning: A comparison of African-American, Asian-American, and Caucasian college women. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 18(2), 181-187.
- Cash, T. F., & Green, G. K. (1986). Body weight and body image among college women: Perception, cognition, and affect. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 50(2), 290-301.
- Cash, T. F., Morrow, J. A., Hrabosky, J. I., & Perry, A. A. (2004). How has body image changed? A cross-sectional investigation of college women and men from 1983 to 2001. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 72(6), 1081.
- Edwards, K. E., & Jones, S. R. (2009). "Putting My Man Face On": A Grounded Theory of College Men's Gender Identity Development. *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(2), 210-228.
- Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Grogan, S., & Richards, H. (2002). Body image focus groups with boys and men. *Men and Masculinities*, 4(3), 219-232.
- Keeton, W. P., Cash, T. F., & Brown, T. A. (1990). Body image or body images?: Comparative, multidimensional assessment among college students. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 54(1-2), 213-230.
- Lowery, S. E., Kurpius, S. E. R., Befort, C., Blanks, E. H., Sollenberger, S., Nicpon, M. F., & Huser, L. (2005). Body image, self-esteem, and health-related behaviors among male and female first year college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(6), 612-623.
- Phinney, J. S. (1989). Stages of ethnic identity development in minority group adolescents. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 9(1-2), 34-49.
- Rucker, C. E., & Cash, T. F. (1992). Body images, body-size perceptions, and eating behaviors among African-American and White college women. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 12(3), 291-299.
- Usmiani, S., & Daniluk, J. (1997). Mothers and their adolescent daughters: Relationship between self-esteem, gender role identity, body image. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 26(1), 45-62.