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Minsun Lee

Iowa State University, minsun1107@gmail.com

Mary Lynn Damhorst

Iowa State University, mldmhrst@iastate.edu

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Women's Body Image Throughout the Adult Life Span: A Living History Approach

Minsun Lee and Mary Lynn Damhorst, Iowa State University, USA

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Body image refers to a person's mental representation of his/her own body, encompassing perceptual, affective, cognitive, and behavioral body aspects (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002). As body image has complex and multidimensional meaning, it is not sufficient to explore women's body image only with quantitative measures, as has been the trend in previous research looking at age differences (e.g., Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). Previous research has compared women across age groups, interpreting differences while ignoring generational effects and unique experiences of individuals; in this study we asked women 65 years and older to think about their current bodies and reflect on their bodies at earlier adult ages. The purpose of the study was to use retrospective data: 1) to arrive at a deeper understanding of women's body image throughout the adult life span and 2) to identify major transitions affecting women's body image in each of three adult life stages. Based on the life course perspective, women's body image at three adult life stages and its development throughout the adult life span were explored.

Method. A paper-based survey including both scale ratings and open-ended questions was used; the qualitative results are reported in this abstract. Data were collected from women aged 65 to 94 in retirement communities and centers in a Midwest U.S. state. Participants were asked to recall their past body image with the assistance of photographs of themselves (self supplied). Seven open-ended questions were incorporated into the survey questionnaire. Participants were asked to describe past and current feelings about their own body and the ideal body they want(ed) to have at three stages of their adult life span (ages 30, 50 and currently). Participants also described the life events and circumstances that shaped their body image and the priority concerns related to their body in each stage of the adult life span. All participants ($n = 102$) provided written responses to at least three open-ended questions, and 73 of the participants provided responses to all seven open-ended questions. About 91% and 82% of the participants reported that it was easy to recall their body image perceptions when they were 30 and 50 years old, respectively. The written data were analyzed line-by-line, using the constant comparison analysis method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Intercoder reliability for application of themes to data was 96%.

Results. Analyses suggest that the women's body image perceptions significantly changed across the adult life span and that the women had different body concerns and evaluations of their bodies at each life stage. Participants placed more value on appearance when they were younger. They remembered having more concerns about their body weight, size, and shape when they were young adults, while their body image concerns shifted to body function and health status as the women aged. However, a desire to lose body weight and/or reduce body size was a lifelong issue for the women. Most participants held an ideal body shape that was thinner than their actual bodies at each age. A consistent theme—*Desire to have a thinner body*—emerged

throughout the three stages of the adult life span. During early adulthood, the women wanted to lose weight to have an ideal body shape—a thin, well-proportioned body with a slim waistline. During midlife, the women wanted to reduce the size of the midsection of their bodies (hips to trunk), while many participants wanted to lose weight for health reasons during later adulthood.

Pregnancy was reported as an important life transition significantly affecting women's body image perceptions during early adulthood. Body changes due to pregnancy were considered as negative experiences. The effect of menopause on women's body image, frequently demonstrated as important in previous studies (e.g., McKinley & Lyon, 2008), was not mentioned by the participants. Body image was *not a priority* life concern for many women during their early and middle adulthood. Participants explained that taking care of family was the primary issue and that housekeeping required more time and attention in their earlier lives. Even though it does not necessarily mean that women in the past were not concerned about their body image, it seems possible that the importance of appearance was not as high as it is today, reflecting cohort differences in women's body images.

Many of the women expressed some degree of positive body image at all stages, but became less satisfied with several aspects of their bodies as they aged, including aging appearance, decline in physical function, and several health problems reflected in appearance. Significant changes through middle and late adulthood included more facial wrinkles, skin disorders, gray and thinning hair, height loss, weight gain, waist thickening, hip enlargement, flabby upper arms, and sagging breasts. Overall, most of the women expressed less body satisfaction as they aged. This finding contrasts with previous cross-generational comparisons which concluded that women's perceived level of body satisfaction remains stable through life (e.g., Grogan, 2008).

This study provides a general picture of women's body image development throughout the adult life span. The results can be strengthened with future studies investigating how women perceive their body image during many more specific periods of life, as well as how important life transitions affect women's body image. Further examination of progression of body image from age 65 to older is warranted. Studies investigating several different generations should also be conducted to identify the aging effects on body image development across generations.

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