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Body Image from the Military Service Member's Perspective: The Effects of Weight Concerns and Social Pressures, and Health-Related Attitudes

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Introduction: Military service members are required to meet service-specific weight and body fat standards, and both active duty and reserve military personnel are required to maintain weight and fitness standards (Hsu et al., 2007). This requirement to be fit and healthy is often found as an additional stressor and as an influence on body image (Myers & Bechtel, 2004). Also, anxiety and changes in eating and exercise prior to the bi-annual fitness tests have been documented (Taylor et al., 2014). Thus, it is important to understand the military service member's weight and body image perceptions in order to adequately plan intervention programs for the service members. The purpose of this study is to examine the antecedents of body image of military service members to better understand social-psychological needs to improve body image. Specifically, this study investigates the effects of weight concerns, perceived social pressures, as well as exercise and eating attitudes on body image.

Literature Review: Using service-specific weight and body fat standards, Kress et al. (Kress & Peterson, & Hartzell, 2006) found that 63 % of men and 33% of women service members were overweight or obese. In addition to the physical effects of overweight and obesity in the military, psychological health and body image satisfaction is impacted. Body image is a mental perception that we have about our bodies (Fallon, 2014). Both how we see our bodies and how we feel about what we see explain body image. Body image develops as a function of culture and time and responds to culturally aesthetic ideals (Rudd & Lennon, 2007) based on the ideal images promoted by mass media (Kim & Lennon, 2007). Any unrealistic or idealized body image can lead to negative self-esteem and unhealthy eating and exercise behaviors; therefore, it is important to examine the antecedents of healthy body image to determine the necessary components of educational intervention programs to promote a healthy body image. Also, dissatisfaction with one's body can cause depression, anger, and deficient social interactions (Martin & Kennedy, 1993). Furthermore, stress related to the fitness assessment adds to the stress that military service members already have in their lives such as deployment, family issues, and economic issues. Therefore, this research study focuses specifically on the body image of military servicemen and women and how it is related to exercise and eating attitudes, as well as their perceived social pressures in the military environment and weight concerns. This study proposes four hypotheses:

H1: a) Weight concerns and b) social pressures will influence exercise attitudes.

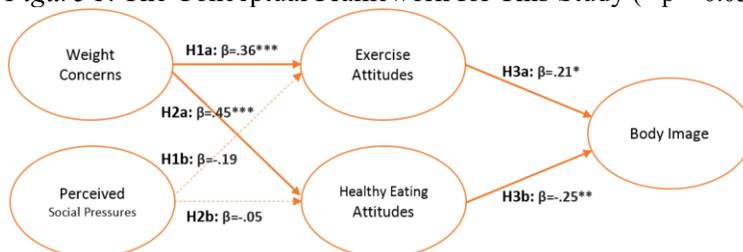
H2: a) Weight concerns and b) social pressures will influence eating attitudes.

H3: Exercise attitudes will influence body image of military service members.

H4: Eating attitudes will influence body image of military service members.

Methodology and Results: A quantitative survey method using a 7-point Likert scale was used for this study. The sample consisted of 123 military service members (68.3% males) from a Southwest university and a military base in the Southwest region of the US. The survey items were adapted from previous literature (O’Cass, 2000). The mean age of the respondents was 31. With regards to ethnicity, the majority were Caucasian (58.5%) followed by Hispanic/Latino (17.9%) and African-American (8.9%). An exploratory factor analysis was performed and a factor loading above 0.60 was retained for each factor. Each factor has a satisfactory reliability above 0.90. Regression analyses were performed to test hypotheses. Weight concerns significantly influenced exercise attitudes ($\beta=0.36, p<.001$), whereas social pressures did not influence exercise attitudes ($\beta=-0.19, p>.05$). Thus, H1 was partially supported. Also, weight concerns significantly influenced healthy eating attitudes ($\beta=0.45, p<.001$), but not social pressures ($\beta=-0.05, p>.05$). Thus, H2 was partially supported. Exercise attitudes influenced body image positively ($\beta=0.21, p<.05$), while healthy eating attitudes influenced body image negatively ($\beta=-0.25, p<.01$). Therefore, H3 was supported (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Conceptual Framework for This Study (* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$)



Conclusion and Implications: This study found that military service members who are concerned about their weights are more likely to have positive attitudes about exercise and healthy eating behaviors. Interestingly, weight concerns were positive influencers to motivate military service members to think about exercising and eating healthy food. Thus, military requirements are not just stressors, but also positive stimuli for military service members for healthy behaviors (Hsu et al., 2007). However, there were no significant influences of perceived social pressures on either exercise or healthy eating attitudes. Furthermore, military service members with positive beliefs related to exercising tend to have positive body image. Therefore, programs with encouraging messages about the positive benefits of exercise may improve exercise attitudes and body image. Last but not least, healthy eating behaviors negatively influenced body image. There was no specific definition about healthy eating in the survey, so it might mean different things for participants. Thus, a clear definition of healthy eating should be provided for future research. Also, future research about civilians’ weight concerns, social pressures, healthy behavior attitudes, and body image will be needed for meaningful findings and comparisons with the military service members.

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