A Qualitative Analysis of Transgender Youth: Body Dissatisfaction vs. Body Satisfaction

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Introduction

Body image is a topic concerning the general population, and while several empirical studies have embarked on deciphering these issues in the present study takes a different developmental approach. This study examines body image attitudes and perceptions as experienced by Transgender youth. Because issues experienced by minority populations are often exacerbated, it will be advantageous to study body image among Transgender youth.

Literature Review: Transgender Youth

Youth found to display more negative body image in regards to weight, body hair distribution, and genitalia dissatisfaction (Bozkurt et al., 2006).

Intensified language was used to articulate negative feelings regarding body hair, and dissatisfaction from body (Pfeifer, 2008).

SM-F transsexuals’ maintained same drive for thinness before and after gender change. Perfectionism was also high among GID patients (Khoosal et al., 2009).

Males and females with conflicted gender identity demonstrated higher levels of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating than control groups (Alders et al., 2010).

Children with GID display more negative emotions and feelings of being less in control, along with elevated skin conductance (Wallen et al., 2007).

Research Goal

To gain a valuable understanding of body image in general populations, by analyzing body image attitudes and perceptions among transgender youth.

To determine how Transgender youth experience body dissatisfaction and body satisfaction as is related to gender expression or body size.

Methodology

Participants

65 Transgender participants from different cities across the country (age 15 – 26).

Self-identified: White (36), Latino/Mexican/Hispanic (16), African American (4), Native American (5), Pacific Islander/Chinese/Asian (4).

40 participants were natal females, 25 were natal males.

22 identified as feminine, 20 identified as masculine, 23 identified as gender queer.

40 participants expressed body dissatisfaction, 25 displayed body satisfaction (not mutually exclusive).

Procedure

Participants recruited via queer youth community centers and online. Semi-structured interview approach was utilized.

Sampling strategy intended to draw together broad focus group in order to facilitate a richer understanding of body dissatisfaction and body satisfaction among Transgender youth.

Grounded Theory used as a method for developing concepts and linkages between emerging themes throughout the minority population.

Open coding procedure, used to form categories, properties, and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Analyzes revealed two prominent themes: Body dissatisfaction and body satisfaction. Each theme contained: categories, properties, and dimensions which denoted each theme.

Category is a classification of concepts. Included: concerns with perfectionism, anxiety/insecurity experienced in relation to the body, hormonal changes, and satisfaction with social changes.

Properties are characteristics pertaining to a category. Included: ability to express self control, criticism, social interaction, how self image was experienced, positive connection to body, and freedom to express self.

Dimension is the location of properties on a continuum. Included: desire to change, build a connection to body, external criticism, internal criticism, ability to pass as desired gender, role taking, self observation, and perception of self image based on others views.

Results

Body Dissatisfaction

- Gender
- Body Size vs. Gender
- Anxiety
- Self-control
- Social Changes
- Hormonal Changes
- Other

1. Body Size vs. Gender

- Tia, 25, M-F

- "I have a lot of feminine physical characteristics, and I am very comfortable with my body. I consider myself well-built. I feel like I am very comfortable in my own skin and feel really comfortable and happy." (Tia, 25, M-F)

- Jack, 23, F-GQ

- "I am actually very comfortable with my body, I don’t have to work to make myself look attractive. There are no parts of my body that I want to change." (Jack, 23, F-GQ)

2. Anxiety

- "I am actually very nervous about my body, I don’t want to be seen in certain situations, I worry about how I look." (Reese, 22, F-M)

- "I have a lot of self-doubt about my body image, I don’t like the way I look." (Reese, 22, F-M)

3. Self-control

- "I don’t think about my body at all. I don’t think about it when I am shirtless, I don’t think about it when I am wearing clothes." (Reese, 22, F-M)

- "I try to ignore my body as much as possible. I don’t think about it when I am shirtless, I don’t think about it when I am wearing clothes." (Reese, 22, F-M)

4. Social Changes

- "I am still learning to accept the changes that are happening to my body. I am still learning to accept the changes that are happening to my body... I am still learning to accept the changes that are happening to my body..." (Reese, 22, F-M)

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5. Hormonal Changes

- "I am actually very nervous about my body, I don’t want to be seen in certain situations, I worry about how I look." (Reese, 22, F-M)

- "I am actually very nervous about my body, I don’t want to be seen in certain situations, I worry about how I look." (Reese, 22, F-M)

Conclusions

Data extends the literature to suggest depth of body image themes through categories, properties, and dimensions. Particularly with the perfectionism and anxiety category, and the self-control property.

Similarly to prior studies, perfectionism was found to be a category of body dissatisfaction. A factor found to be high among GID patients (Khoosal et al., 2009).

Analogous to the literature, transgender participants expressed feelings of being less in control. However, control was indicated through self-harm or eating disorders.

Further, participants experienced anxiety/insecurity in relation to the body which is similar to the Wallen et al. study which found elevated levels of skin conductance (2007).

Implications

Research is linked to a broader developmental theme, where we find social interactions to be inhibitors of body satisfaction and/or body dissatisfaction.

This extends the eating disorder literature which focuses on internal processes as a primary foundation of this phenomenon.

A linkage was also found between hormonal changes and body image, which can help inform other body image studies.