



Women's Body Image Throughout the Adult Life Span: A Latent Growth Modeling Approach

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During the adult life span, women experience physical, social, psychological, and biological changes, such as weight gain, marriage, pregnancy, social role changes, retirement, and menopause, and these changes can significantly impact how women perceive their body and appearance. Despite the large volume of body image research, few studies have examined and compared women's body images at different stages of adult development. In those studies, cross-sectional techniques are used in which women of different age cohorts are compared (e.g., Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). These comparisons may lead to erroneous conclusions because of confounding generational effects. Only scant research has adopted longitudinal research designs, but examine only limited time periods (e.g., Keel, Baxter, Heatherton, & Joiner, 2007).

The objectives of this study were: 1) to understand how women view their body image throughout the adult life course, 2) to explore patterns in adult women's body image development from the life course perspective, and 3) to identify whether there are distinct developmental trajectories of women's body image perceptions. The life course perspective and self-discrepancy theory were the theoretical perspectives that shaped the study (Elder, 1994; Higgins, 1987).

Method. To measure participants' body image in each of three adult life phases—early, middle, and late adulthood, a paper-based questionnaire was used for data collection. Women 65 and older were recruited from senior communities and centers in a Midwest state. Data were collected from 102, mostly White/European American, females aged 65 and older with a mean age of 80. The mean of their BMI scores was 26.8 (SD = 5.7), in the “overweight” range.

Older participants were asked to recall their past body image perceptions. To help participants remember and improve the accuracy of recalled data, participants were asked to refer to pictures of themselves at each life stage. In a repeated measures design, the same measures were used to assess participants' body image at age 30, 50, and currently. Measures included perceived actual body shape and ideal body shape, actual/ideal body image discrepancy, and body satisfaction (Stunkard, Sorensen, & Shulsinger, 1983; Cash, Fleming, Alindoga, Steadman, & Whitehead, 2002).

To examine the stability of the multi-item body satisfaction measure over time, longitudinal confirmatory factor analysis was performed. To examine trajectories of quantitative change in all body image measures, nine unconditional first-order latent growth models (1LGM) were tested. As three time waves of data were included, the linear functions were examined.

Results. Overall fit measures of all nine 1LGMs indicated good fit to the data (non-significant *chi*-square statistics; all NFIs ranging from .90 to .98; all IFIs, TLIs, and CFIs ranging from .97 to 1.00; all RMSEAs below .08; all SRMRs below .05). Significant linear upward trends were found for perceptions of actual and ideal body shape on a scale of 1-9, with 9 indicating larger size. The average level of actual body shape perception at early adulthood (M_1)

was 3.52, and linearly increased throughout their adult life span to 4.86 ($M_S = .67, p < .001$). The average for participants' perceived ideal body shape at early adulthood (M_1) was 3.40, and a significant increase was found over time to 4.28. ($M_S = .44, p < .001$). Women typically become heavier as they age into their 60s, due to weight gain and changes in body fat composition. Women's ideal body shape also became larger, possibly because that is more realistic (Grogan, 2008). Significant individual variability in perceived actual shape during early adulthood and the rate of its change over adulthood was found ($V_I = .30, p < .05$; $V_S = .23, p < .01$). However, the variance test in both intercept and the slope of the perceived ideal body shape trajectory revealed non-significant individual difference ($V_I = .02, p = .74$; $V_S = .03, p = .49$). Regardless of what body shapes women had during early adulthood and how much their body shapes changed over time, women usually considered a thinner than their own body shape as their ideal. Larger ideal body shape in early adulthood was associated with higher rates of increase in women's perceptions of ideal body shape during aging ($Cov = .14, p < .001$).

The average level of actual/ideal body image discrepancy at early adulthood (M_1) was .16 ($p < .05$) and linearly increased by .24 (M_S) for each of the adult life span stages ($p < .001$), indicating a significant increasing linear trend. Thus, women's ideal body shapes changed less than their perceived actual body shapes did. Levels of women's perceived satisfaction with physical appearance, body size and shape, body weight, physical attractiveness, and physical functioning decreased linearly and significantly with age. The average level of satisfaction with physical function ($M_S = -.72, p < .001$) showed the sharpest linear decreasing trend.

Self-discrepancy theory was supported by the findings. The longitudinal, retrospective approach provides methodological contributions. However, limited sample characteristics and recall bias need to be studied further.

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