

Mirror Exposure and its Impact on Body Image and Sexual Well-Being

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Introduction

Self Objectification Theory: Women* internalize and adopt an observer's perspective of their bodies and begin to regard themselves as mere objects.^{5,6} Self-objectification fosters constant surveillance and hyper-attention to the body which can lead to negative psychological effects such as body shame and appearance anxiety. Such psychological effects among women increases self-consciousness about physical appearance, which can result in the devaluation of themselves as sexual beings and in turn threatens their sexual satisfaction and sexual functioning.⁶

Body and Genital Image: Multifaceted² construct including:

- Evaluative—Being *satisfied* or *dissatisfied*
- Affective—*Body and genital esteem*
- Cognitive-Behavioral Investment—Distracting thoughts (*cognitive distraction*) pertaining to body and/or genital appearance during sexual activity

Sexual Well-Being: Multifaceted⁴ construct including:

- Sexual satisfaction
- Female sexual functioning (including desire, arousal, lubrication, orgasm, and pain)

Rationale and Study Goals

Relationship of Body and Genital Image and Sexual Well-being: Research has shown the negative effects that poor body image and genital image have on sexual satisfaction and functioning.¹ This baseline survey re-examined these relationships in a broader sample of heterosexual and non-heterosexual women and examined how cognitive distraction mediates the relationship between image and well-being.

Need for an Intervention: Potential interventions that aim to decrease poor body image, genital image, and sexual insecurities are essential for women's sexual well-being. Mindfulness-based mirror exposure is examined in this study. Past research on mirror exposure therapy has shown that after multiple sessions, body dissatisfaction, body checking, and body avoidance decreased.^{3,5} However, these studies were mainly among patients with eating disorders, and no studies tested effects on genital image or sexual well-being. The present research will measure these constructs and use a non-clinical sample of women.

Mindfulness-Based Mirror Exposure

- *Objective:* To change participants' focus of attention from areas of criticism to a more holistic perspective of the entire body
- *Procedure:* Individuals observed parts of their entire bodies in a full-length mirror and described body parts, without judgment or critical language

* Although not all people who have anatomically female reproductive organs identify as women, for the purposes of this poster, I will refer to the main subjects as "women."

Method: Baseline Survey

Goal: Examine relationships between various measures of body and genital image and sexual well-being

Participants: 166 women recruited by email and online

- Mean age 21.2 (SD = 3.19; range 18-48); 84% White, 56% straight, 22% bisexual, 8% queer, 5% lesbian

Online Survey: consisted of six adapted measures

- Body satisfaction (BSS; Rappoport, Clark & Wardle, 2000)
- Body esteem (BESAA; Franzoi & Shields, 1984)
- Genital esteem (GAS; Bramwell & Morland, 2009; Reinholtz & Muelenhard, 1995)
- Cognitive distraction (CDS; Dove & Wiederman, 2000)
- Sexual satisfaction (SSS; Alfonso et al., 1996)
- Sexual functioning (FSFI; Rosen et al., 2000)



Method: Mindfulness-Based Mirror Exposure Intervention

Goal: To investigate the role of mindfulness-based mirror exposure in reducing negative body and genital image, cognitive distraction, sexual functioning difficulties, and sexual dissatisfaction

- Participants were recruited from the baseline survey for a 4 session intervention
- 39 participants completed session one, 31 completed session two, 24 session three, and 26 completed the final session.

During each session: Via SurveyMonkey, the intervention guided each participant to view each body feature as they described them in front of the mirror.

- Participants were asked to:
 - *Imagine describing themselves to someone who is blind or who is drawing them.*
 - *Pay equal attention to all areas of the body.*
 - *Use terms related to color, texture, and proportion rather than subjective language.*
 - *Use nonjudgmental and kind language.*

After each session they completed a short narrative reflection. After the final session, participants were asked to complete the baseline survey questions a second time.

Results

Hypothesis 1: Body and genital image are related to sexual satisfaction and sexual functioning. (Baseline survey; See Table 1 for scale correlations)

- The more dissatisfied that women were with their body parts the higher their sexual difficulties were. That is, difficulties with arousal, desire, orgasm, lubrication, and satisfaction during sexual activity.
- Women who experienced lower levels of body esteem reported more difficulties with sexual satisfaction and feeling aroused or achieving orgasm in sexual situations.
- Women with low genital image also reported lower levels of sexual satisfaction and all aspects of sexual functioning.

Hypothesis 2: Women with poor body image and poor genital image also have higher levels of cognitive distraction. (Baseline survey; See Table 1)

- Women who reported high levels of poor body image and poor genital image also reported high levels of distracting thoughts pertaining to their bodies and genitals during sexual activity.

Hypothesis 3: Women with higher levels of cognitive distraction also have higher levels of sexual dissatisfaction and sexual functioning difficulties. (Baseline survey; See Table 1)

- Women who experienced increased appearance-based thoughts during sexual activity also experienced lower levels of sexual satisfaction. They also had difficulties with arousal, desire, lubrication, and achieving orgasms.

Hypothesis 4: Cognitive distraction explains the relationship between body image and sexual well-being. (Mediation analyses from baseline survey)

- Cognitive distraction fully mediated the relationships between body satisfaction and sexual satisfaction; body esteem and sexual satisfaction and functioning; and genital esteem and sexual satisfaction and functioning.
- For participants attracted to the same sex, cognitive distraction did not explain the relationship between body image and sexual well-being.

Hypothesis 5: A mirror exposure intervention would increase body and genital image, decrease cognitive distraction, and increase sexual functioning and sexual satisfaction

(t-tests comparing baseline survey means to post-intervention means; See Figure 1)

- After completing the four sessions of mirror exposure, participants' body esteem significantly increased. No other changes were statistically significant.

Table 1. Summary of Baseline Correlations

	BSS	BESAA	GAS	CDS	SSS	FSFI
BSS	-	.83**	-.58**	-.58**	.36**	.40**
BESAA		-	-.48**	-.64**	.32**	.25**
GAS			-	.58**	-.46**	-.53**
CDS				-	-.45**	-.37**
SSS					-	.71**
FSFI						-

Note. BSS = Body Satisfaction Scale. BESAA = Body Esteem Scale for Adult Adolescents. GAS = Genital Satisfaction Scale. CDS = Cognitive Distraction Scale. SSS = Sexual Satisfaction Scale. FSFI = Female Sexual Functioning Index.

* p < .05; ** p < .01;

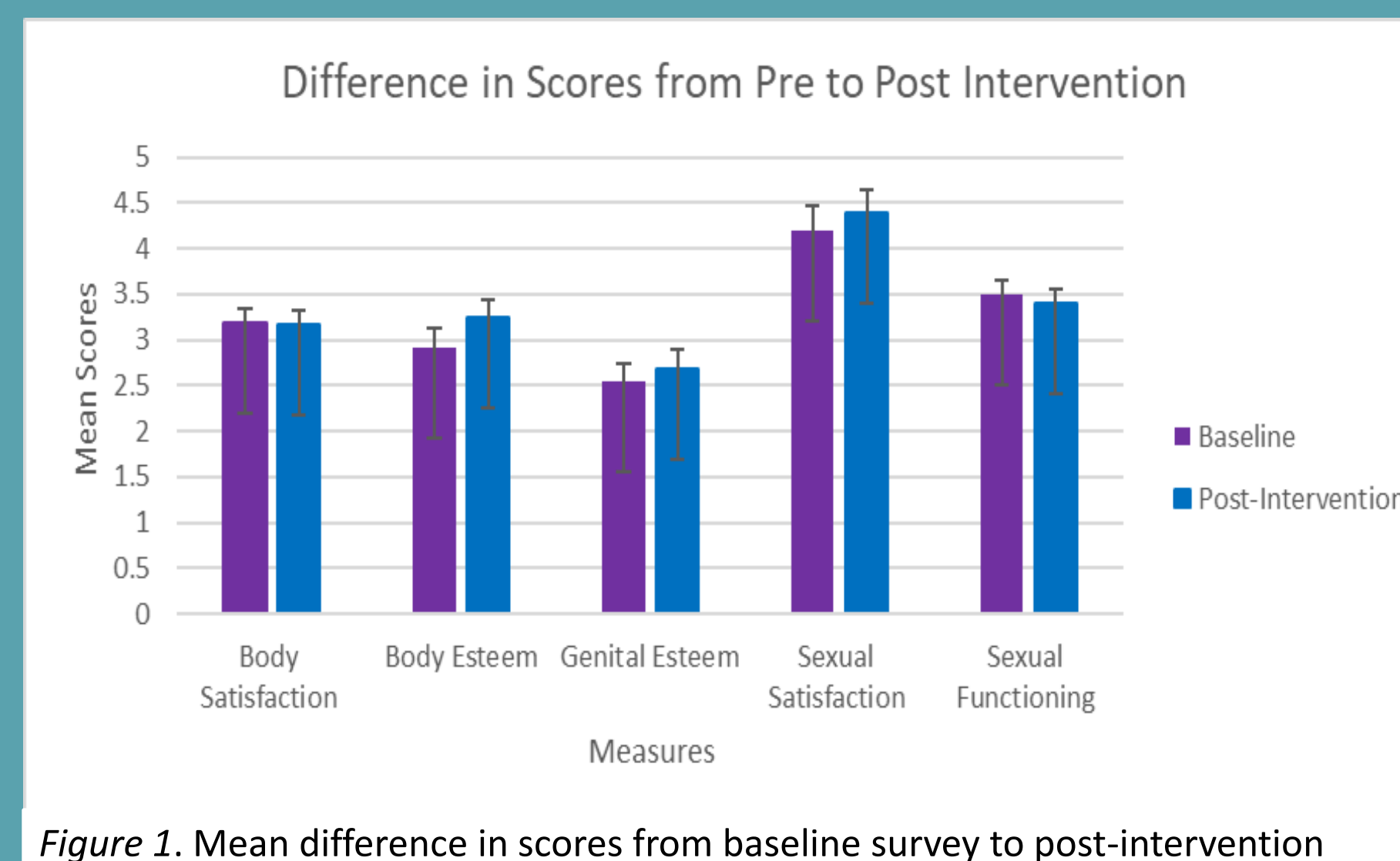


Figure 1. Mean difference in scores from baseline survey to post-intervention

Reflections Post-Intervention

"After completing this study, I feel more accepting of my body. I still struggle with body image issues, but I'm closer to becoming more accepting. I found it easier to describe my body in a non self-deprecating tone, like I was doing before. Forcing myself to act like I accept certain body parts, has helped me accept them. I still feel like my genitalia looks weird, but I know its normal. So I'm still struggling with accepting those parts of me. But overall I'm more accepting of body parts that I wasn't before and more aware of the body parts I already liked"

"After completing the activity I felt a sense of pride that I was able to look at my genitals so in depth and just notice them. It was interesting to see them like that out of a clinical setting. Overall I liked the sessions and they have made me look at my body more objectively than negatively subjective. It has brought my attention to parts of my body that I usually ignore and made me appreciate myself more as a whole"



Conclusions

Relationship Between Body and Genital Image and Sexual Well-Being

- There are important links between body and genital image and sexual well-being.
- For women attracted to the same sex, distracting thoughts during sexual activity did not relate to sexual satisfaction or sexual functioning, whereas distracting thoughts during sexual activity explained why body image concerns impacted sexual satisfaction and functioning for women attracted to the opposite sex.
- Professionals may consider body image concerns when clients present difficulties with sexual functioning or low levels of sexual satisfaction.

Mindfulness-Based Mirror Exposure

- The mirror exposure positively impacted women's body esteem. After completing the session, women reported feeling better about their bodies as a whole.
- It is expected that if participants continued to complete sessions of mirror exposure, genital image and sexual well-being would increase.
- Therapists may consider recommending mirror exposure therapy for patients who are experiencing body image concerns and sexual difficulties.

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