

EXPLORING FEMINIST WOMEN'S BODY CONSCIOUSNESS

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In a qualitative investigation of young feminists' experience of body consciousness, 25 feminist women each participated in one of 6 focus groups examining the ways they experienced body image and negotiated cultural messages about women's appearance. Participants described their experience with objectification and its impact on their body image, sense of self, and relationships with other women. Although feminism provided an alternative way to understand cultural messages and reframe negative thoughts, this understanding did not necessarily affect aesthetic reactions. Participants experienced conflict between their feminist *beliefs* and their *feelings* about beauty ideals and their own appearance. This conflict is interpreted in terms of a mere exposure effect and existing gender/power relations. Suggestions of ways feminist psychologists can support young women's strategies for resisting negative cultural messages are provided.

Eating disorders are "high profile" disorders in the popular and academic literature (Malson, 1998, p. 94). Although there is now a large and growing body of research examining various risk factors for eating disorders and body dissatisfaction, researchers have been basically silent on the question of how to conceptualize protective factors (Striegel-Moore & Cachelin, 1999). The field has been especially silent about potentially protective factors that challenge the mainstream of society, such as feminism. However, as Shildrick and Price (1999) noted, "feminism has long seen its own project as intimately connected to the body" (p. 1). Feminists have articulated the economic and social profitability of women's bodily discontent (e.g., Wolf, 1991) and have raised awareness of the function and consequences of women's objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Hyde & McKinley, 1996). They have described how regulation of the female body—through religious, educational, scientific, and med-

ical institutions, as well as through everyday discourse and media images—restricts girls' and women's experience, delimits their identity, and shapes their subjectivity. Nonetheless, the process through which feminist identity and feminist consciousness affect women's experience of their bodies remains relatively unexamined.

Feminism and Beauty Ideals

There has been some research examining the relationship between feminist identification and feminist attitudes and body satisfaction, typically among primarily White, college-aged women (Cash, Ancis, & Strachan, 1997; Dionne, Davis, Fox, & Gurevich, 1995; Kelson, Kearney-Cooke, & Lansky, 1990; Ojerholm & Rothblum, 1999; Snyder & Hasbrouck, 1996). However, the results of these investigations have been inconsistent. In a sample of undergraduate women from a liberal arts college, Snyder and Hasbrouck (1996), for example, found that endorsing traditional gender-role ideals on the feminist identity development scale (FIDS) was related to body dissatisfaction, but identification with nontraditional gender-role ideals had no relationship to body dissatisfaction. Cash et al.'s (1997) study of ethnically diverse college women found conventional expectations and preferences regarding male–female social relations correlated with internalization of the societal standards of physical appearance, but no relationship between body satisfaction and feminist attitudes measured with the FIDS. In their study of students, staff, and faculty at a large Canadian university, Dionne et al. (1995) found that endorsing specific feminist beliefs about physical attractiveness on a feminist ideology scale predicted lower levels of body dissatisfaction, but overall feminist identification did not. Ojerholm and Rothblum (1999) found that neither feminist

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This research is based on Rubin's master's thesis, which was co-chaired by Nemeroff and Russo. We want to thank committee members Mary Davis and Angela Trethewey for their suggestions and feedback, and Connie Engel, Jean Denious, and Mindy Erchull for co-facilitating the focus group discussions. Most importantly, we want to express deep appreciation to our focus group participants for offering their time and energy to this project. Funding for this research was provided by an APA Division 35 Hyde Graduate Student Research Award and an NIMH Prevention Science Research Training Grant (T32 MH18387) awarded to Lisa R. Rubin.

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self-identification (measured on a Likert-type scale) nor attitudes toward feminism were related to body image among undergraduate college women, although feminist identity and positive attitudes toward feminism were related to less negative attitudes toward fat people in general.

Only two studies have asked women to directly state whether they self-identify as a feminist, whereas the others have measured feminist attitudes or the *degree* to which women consider themselves feminists (Garner, 1997; Kelson et al., 1990). This is an important distinction, as many women endorse feminist attitudes, but fewer actually identify themselves as a “feminist” (Williams & Wittig, 1997). Employing a sample of female undergraduates, Kelson et al. (1990) found that beautification techniques (e.g., makeup, hairstyling) were significantly related to feelings about the body for nonfeminists, but not for feminists, and that body competence was related to appearance for nonfeminists but not for feminists. Garner’s (1997) survey of *Psychology Today* readers found that 49% of “traditional women” as compared with 32% of self-proclaimed feminists endorsed overall appearance discontent. Altogether, these results suggest that general endorsement of feminist beliefs may not confer protection from body dissatisfaction, whereas self-identification as a feminist and endorsement of specific feminist beliefs about physical attractiveness may.

Rejecting beauty ideals is a radical act, particularly for college-aged women, for whom appearance norms may be most salient and centrally related to current social identities (sorority member, dating partner, etc.). Women who endorse feminist attitudes but who do not label themselves as feminists may be less likely to challenge these ideals. Thus, current measures of feminist attitudes may fail to discriminate between those women most likely to resist mainstream messages regarding women’s beauty and those who do not.

Although it is unlikely that feminism is a panacea for body image disturbances, taken together these research findings suggest that certain feminist attitudes, and feminist self-identification in particular, relate to women’s experience of their bodies, though the nature of this relationship remains unclear.

Researching Resistance

Feminist psychologists have noted the importance of “attending to women’s strengths and capabilities as well as their problems; researching variables related to women’s competency and resilience” and “exploring dimensions of power as influences on the quality of women’s lives” (Worell & Etaugh, 1994, p. 447). However, even feminist researchers have rarely systematically examined women’s capacities to resist powerful cultural messages and aesthetic ideals. Davis (1995) noted that when speaking about women’s bodily objectification, we risk overlooking women’s agency and may inadvertently portray women as culture dupes. Feminist researchers have important roles to play in

investigating women’s strategies for negotiating—resisting, subverting, or otherwise navigating—body image concerns *within* the constraints of a culture that objectifies women’s bodies (Davis, 1995).

Obtaining qualitative data provides a complementary approach for generating the knowledge needed to develop a portrait of how feminists develop their body consciousness and negotiate cultural messages about women’s appearance. The focus group method is considered particularly well suited for exploratory, interpretative, multimethod, and phenomenological research questions (Morgan & Krueger, 1998; Wilkinson, 1999). As Sue Wilkinson (1999) has observed, choosing a method “is not simply a technical decision, but an epistemological and theoretical one as well” (p. 222). We chose focus groups to conduct this study in order to explore diversity among feminists and gain more in-depth knowledge about the complexity of their behaviors and motivations (Morgan & Krueger, 1998). Listening as participants share and compare their experiences is a way to illuminate dimensions of experience overlooked by previous theory and method. The focus group approach is particularly useful when attempting to break new ground, as the interactive nature of the group discussion helps reduce the power and influence of the researcher over the participants by “tilting the balance of power toward the group” (Madriz, 2000, p. 838; see also Wilkinson, 1999).

In this paper, we report the results of a qualitative study of young feminists’ embodied experiences, examining how feminist women negotiate ideologies that define mainstream (i.e., White, upper and middle-class) cultural ideals of female beauty. We were particularly interested in examining risk, resiliency, and resistance among feminist women. Resistance was defined as rejecting ideologies of women’s bodies that support women’s subordination. Commonly expressed cultural ideologies about women’s bodies in Western culture that support and perpetuate women’s subordination include: (a) Women’s bodies are never fine as they are; (b) Women should be constantly aware of, and attending to, their bodies; (c) Women should suppress their bodily appetites (i.e., for food, sex, emotions); (d) Women’s bodies—their size, shape, style, and comportment—are texts through which their morals and values will be read; (e) Women’s bodies are objects and commodities; (f) Women’s bodies exist to serve others; and (g) Beautiful women are thin and Anglo-featured (see Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1993; hooks, 1992; and Kilbourne, 1994, for a more extensive review of these ideologies).

This study investigates how women confront such messages. In it, we seek to understand how feminists attempt to maintain positive feelings about their bodies while living in a culture that objectifies female bodies and links women’s economic and social power to their appearance. In addition to exploring how participants describe their feelings about their bodies, we examine the specific strategies that feminist young women use to resist cultural ideologies and to overcome barriers to resistance they have encountered.

METHOD

Participants

Undergraduate and graduate women who self-identified as a “feminist” or “womanist” were invited to participate in group discussions about beauty ideals in our culture. Recruitment materials indicated that the researcher, a graduate student in Clinical Psychology, was looking for women who self-identified as “feminist” or “womanist” to participate in focus group discussions about “representations of women, beauty norms, and body image in American culture . . . aimed at developing a better understanding of the feminist experience of body, beauty, and culture.” Participants were not screened with measures assessing feminist identification, but rather, their decision to participate, knowing this criterion, was considered sufficient “proof” of their identification. They were compensated \$10–15 for their participation. Participants were recruited from several Women's Studies courses, various woman-centered campus organizations, and student list-servs at a large, state university in the Southwest. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 42 years old (median age = 24). Twenty-two women identified as White, 1 identified as African American, and 2 identified as both Latina and White. Fifteen participants identified as heterosexual, 5 women as bisexual, and 3 as lesbian. Two participants indicated that they would “rather not check a box.”

Procedure

The focus group discussions were conducted in the Clinical Psychology Center on campus. The senior author facilitated each group, along with one other female doctoral student. Participants were asked the following types of questions: What kinds of things make you aware of your body? How does being a feminist affect what you notice about mainstream culture's beauty ideals? How has your ethnic background or sexual orientation shaped your feelings about your body? Do you ever try to resist or shield yourself from cultural messages about beauty? Although the focus groups were guided by an interview protocol, participants had considerable flexibility in determining the direction of the conversation. Participants were encouraged to ask questions to each other and to facilitators. Discussions lasted approximately 1 to 1.5 hours. The focus groups were audiotaped, and the audiotapes were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

In qualitative research, sample adequacy “is attained when sufficient data have been collected that saturation occurs and variation is both accounted for and understood” (Morse, 1994, p. 230). Theoretical saturation is reached when no new themes emerge from subsequent data, and themes already established from the data are repeated and confirmed. Thus, focus groups were conducted until the criterion of theoretical saturation was met, based on a review of the transcripts and preparation of focus group summaries. A total of six, one-session focus groups were conducted,

based on this criterion. Five groups had 4 members, and one was composed of 5 members.

Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted using grounded theory methodology. Strauss and Corbin (1994) describe grounded theory as “a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed” (p. 273). Grounded theory can be used to generate new theory, or to modify or elaborate on an existing relevant theory; in either case, this approach requires a rigorous matching of theory with data. Using feminist and psychological theories of women's bodily consciousness as sensitizing concepts, we analyzed the data for emergent themes that suggest how young feminist women experience their bodies, and how they negotiate cultural messages regarding women's bodies. The senior author read through each focus group transcript and coded the major themes and subthemes from each group through an iterative process. Throughout this process, coding categories were compared and contrasted across groups, and through this process, thematic categories were refined and expanded. The following issues were considered in determining the main themes: (a) Does this information further our understanding of how women experience their bodies?; (b) Does this information further our knowledge about the ways women resist or accommodate mainstream messages about women's body?; (c) Has this topic/issue been raised by more than one member of the group?; (d) Are participants interested in exploring or expanding on this topic? The co-authors consulted on the development of the coding scheme throughout the process of data collection and analysis. An independent auditor evaluated the final coding scheme (see Tables 1 and 2 for final coding scheme). In addition, member checks were conducted by sending each participant a summary of the thematic analysis, including supporting quotations, from their individual group. Participants were asked to evaluate their experience of the group and the adequacy of the analysis.

As traditional notions of generalizability, reliability, and validity often do not apply to qualitative research, the concept of trustworthiness, determined by confirmability, dependability, credibility, and transferability, has been considered a more appropriate standard (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability is akin to quantitative notions of objectivity, and refers to the extent to which findings result from the inquiry, and not the biases of the researcher. Confirmability was determined through the auditor's review of the researcher's audit trail, which included raw data, thematic summaries, member checks, and the final scheme. Dependability is analogous to reliability, and was determined through demonstration of consistent themes arising in multiple focus groups, and by the co-authors' and auditor's review of the analysis. Credibility refers to the extent to which constructions and interpretations seem plausible, or

Table 1
Thematic Summary: Domain I, Body Consciousness

<i>Domain I: Body Consciousness (BC)</i>		
<i>Theme</i>	<i>Description of theme</i>	<i>Groups</i>
Triggers of BC	Triggers of BC described as promoting poor body image include social comparisons/competition, objectifying gaze of others, and media exposure.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
Development and BC	Triggers of BC described as promoting positive body image include yoga and touch. Puberty and pregnancy were associated with change in participants' experience of their body/self, and change in how their bodies are viewed.	3, 4 4, 5
Consequences of BC	BC described as damaging to mental and physical health, psychological development, and relationships with other women.	1, 2, 5
Identities and BC ¹	Feminist identity was described as a filtering lens. Cultural identity, including religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, was described as filtering lens through which cultural messages are viewed.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 1, 3, 5, 6

Note. Column labeled "Groups" identified groups in which the corresponding theme emerged.

¹Feminist identity and, to a lesser extent, cultural identities, were described both in terms of participants' bodily awareness and their strategies of resistance (see Table 2, "Awareness as Resistance"). In the Results section, the role of feminist identity is described under the heading, "Strategies of Feminist Resistance." Cultural identity is only mentioned in passing.

"ring true," to participants (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994), and was assessed through member checks. Participants' positive evaluation of the analysis, and of the group experience in general supports the credibility of the results. Participants described the group as a safe and enjoyable experience through comments such as, "everyone was warm and welcoming and I felt very comfortable sharing my feelings" and "I really appreciated this experience. It was great to be in a group where we could all express ourselves openly and honestly without passing judgment." Future research should be conducted to determine the extent to which the findings presented here are transferable, meaning that they can be applied in new contexts or with new participants.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

The purpose of this study was to understand how feminist women experience their bodies, and how they resist, ac-

commodate, or otherwise experience cultural ideologies regarding women's attractiveness. Two domains of responses emerged, one relating to experiences of body consciousness and the other to strategies of resistance. Rather than passively receiving or radically resisting cultural messages, we found that women in this study constantly negotiated feelings and practices related to their bodies. Focus group discussions suggested that objectifying experiences played a crucial role in the formation and maintenance of participants' body image and identity. Feminism provided participants with an alternative way to interpret cultural ideologies of women's bodies, and offered specific strategies to resist these ideologies on a personal and societal level. However, many participants confided that, despite "knowing better," they often still experienced body dissatisfaction and shame regarding their appearance. Thus, we explored the experiences, struggles, and contradictions described by focus group participants in the context of objectification and social comparison theories.

Table 2
Thematic Summary: Domain II, Feminist Resistance

<i>Domain II: Feminist Resistance</i>		
<i>Theme</i>	<i>Description of theme</i>	<i>Groups</i>
Celebrate Bodily Diversity	Celebration of diversity defined by recognizing the range of women's body sizes, viewing all female bodies as beautiful, seeing beauty in curvaceousness, or recognizing bodily beauty in oneself.	2, 3, 4, 5, 6
Awareness as Resistance	Feminist consciousness facilitated awareness and recognition of cultural messages about women's bodies, and was viewed as a necessary first step in resisting ideals.	2, 3, 4, 5, 6
Limits of Resistance	Cognitive strategies described as limited to changing thoughts, not feelings, about beauty ideals.	1, 2, 4, 5
Emancipatory Resistance	Strategies that promote agency and reclaim the body from the objectifying gaze, including athletics, dance, taking up space, moving with confidence, and redefining beauty.	2, 3, 5

Body Consciousness and Self-Objectification

All of the focus groups began by asking participants, "what are the kinds of things that make you aware of your body?" In response to this question, a few participants described experiences such as yoga, or "the way my body feels . . . when I dress a different kind of way," referring to a subjective awareness of their bodily sensations. However, the vast majority of participants responded to this question by discussing experiences of bodily objectification (see Table 1). According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), sexual objectification of women occurs "whenever a woman's body, body parts, or sexual functions are separated out from her person, reduced to the mere instruments, or regarded as if they were capable of representing her" (p. 175). Participants described situations that objectify women in general and experiences in which they had personally felt their body was objectified as key triggers of body consciousness. On the whole, these experiences left participants feeling uncomfortable and self-conscious about their appearance.

The wide range of contexts in which group members felt their bodies were on display was striking. Participants discussed how contexts and situations that promote objectification—situations that make them feel that they are their body, including shopping, going to dance clubs, and sometimes even walking across their college campus—make them more aware of their bodies and concerned about their appearance. One participant noted, "I think it's other people's reactions to the way you look, comments, facial expressions that make you realize that your body is not acceptable in society." A look or casual glance can carry a powerful message. Regardless of whether these looks suggest to a woman that her body is unacceptable, or that it is sexually appealing, these gazes function to reduce a woman to an object, a mere bodily being. One participant explained:

I sometimes can feel really self-conscious like if I'm walking around, you know, and people are looking at my breasts or something like that. That's when I become very hyper-aware of what I'm wearing and what, you know, how my body looks . . . even if they're giving me admiring looks, it's not a good feeling. . . sometimes it makes me angry because I feel like I can't not be scrutinized no matter where I go or what I wear, it's always, like, being stared at.

Even admiring looks can be threatening, and give women reason to be vigilant about their bodies and their vulnerability.

For some participants, sexual harassment and sexualized gazing from others formed their notions of womanhood. Experiencing change in how others reacted to their body changed their view of their own body and their identity. As one group member related:

I think I first became aware of my body when I was going through puberty. . . I'd be walking down the street in shorts and a small top and men would be like yelling

and whistling and stuff out of cars and I started to think of my body in a different way then . . . that's when I started thinking of myself more as a woman I think than a girl.

In other words, as her body was "read" by others as a woman's body, she *became* a woman. Another participant described how she was socialized to take an observer's perspective of her body and appearance during early adolescence. She explained:

I developed really early, um, and I remember all the other little kids from the neighborhood we would ride our bikes down to this little convenience store and we would ride down with like our bathing suits and T-shirts . . . There was a point where my mom was like, you know, you need to put some more clothes on because. . . she's like, I know that you don't think of it this way, but this is how other people are gonna think of it. And people are gonna view you certain ways. And it's just like you were saying, the men, sexually, are gonna view you.

We speculate that mothers are most often faced with the difficult task of preparing their adolescent daughters to cope with the probability that they will experience sexual objectification as they develop into young women.

Objectification and Women's Relationships

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) maintain that "the cultural milieu of objectification functions to socialize girls and women to, at some level, treat *themselves* as objects to be looked at and evaluated" (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 177, emphasis in original). Just as the cultural milieu of objectification socializes women to view themselves as objects, it also socializes them to view other women in this same way. In fact, of all the triggers of body consciousness mentioned by participants, comparisons with other women were one of the issues discussed in every group. Long ago, Leon Festinger (1954) proposed that exposure to idealized beauty (e.g., through media imagery) provokes social comparison among individuals. Women objectify themselves through gazing at other women. As one group member noted, "We don't just survey ourselves, we survey every, you know, every woman." Participants felt that engaging in social comparison processes profoundly affected their body image. As one participant described:

I'll go out in jeans and a nice shirt and a nice pair of shoes. But all the people around me are wearing you know, these dresses and they've got their hair all done up, and then, like I feel fine when I leave the house, but then when I get there I feel really uncomfortable and like, ugly.

Comparisons such as this leave women feeling ugly, ashamed, or self-conscious of their appearance. Another participant noted:

Being in Arizona, where you wear less clothes, I see women who wear like their bathing suits to class, I'm like okay, uh, [I'm] not gonna be doing that, you know. But I think that makes me feel a little self-conscious.

Body image researchers have found that comparing one's body with other women is related to body dissatisfaction in women (see Heinberg & Thompson, 1992; Striegel-Moore, McAvay, Rodin, 1986). In fact, Heinberg and Thompson (1992) found that individuals who compare themselves with similar others have greater body image anxiety and subjective body dissatisfaction, *regardless* of whether their comparisons were "upward" (with more attractive individuals) or "downward." These authors interpret these findings as an indication that "the comparison process is in itself a threatening phenomenon" (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999, p. 131). Consistent with previous research on social comparison and body image, participants in this study indicated that they usually felt worse about their bodies after comparing themselves with others.

Several group members lamented the effects these comparisons have on their ability to establish satisfying relationships with other women. Appropriating the lyrics of musician and feminist youth icon, Ani DiFranco, one participant exclaimed, "It's like Ani DiFranco said, that everyone harbors a secret hatred for the prettiest girl in the room, and that's not fair either." As this comment suggests, group members wanted more intimacy and less competition with other women. Participants denounced competition as a manifestation of a patriarchal system: "But I think a lot of the whole competition comes back to patriarchy, because you are competing, you're supposed to be beautiful, you're supposed to pick, be picked. You're all in competition for the right guy to pick you."

Participants discussed alternative possibilities for women's relationships, such as the one represented in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's (1979) feminist utopia, *Herland*.

I think that was my favorite part of *Herland*, that we read in our class . . . that there was an immense, like, camaraderie among the women. Like, there was no competition, and they were just really interested in seeing each other and talking to each and being together.

In another group, one woman lamented:

I don't think I've ever had a woman say to me, I think it would be nice for a woman to say to me, you have a really beautiful body . . . but I think that, I don't know, [in] our society, women don't do that for one another very often.

The last part of this remark may suggest a link between women's competition within patriarchal structures and homophobia. Perhaps "women don't do that for one another very often" in our society because they fear being labeled a "lesbian," losing certain heterosexual privileges, or becoming a potential target of discrimination.

However, it was not only heterosexual women in the study that felt that comparisons hurt their relationships with other women. Lesbian and bisexual women are also raised in a cultural milieu that objectifies women and are not free from these practices. As one lesbian participant discussed:

I've noticed that kind of thing a lot dating women. Like, if I'm with someone who's thinner than me I'm comparing myself to the body of the person that I'm dating and I'm, you know, and when I'm with other people who are heavier than me, they're like saying, things like well . . . you're this, you're that, I don't know how I feel about that. And it's like, wait a minute, you know. We're people who love women's bodies, you know. We love women, so why are we, as feminists, comparing each other's bodies?

Strategies of Feminist Resistance

One of the central goals of this study was to understand the experience of *feminist* embodiment. As Amelia Richards has observed, "body image may be the pivotal third wave issue—the common struggle that mobilizes the current feminist generation" (1998, p. 196).¹ This generation of feminist scholars and activists has raised public awareness of the objectification of women in advertising and other media sources, deconstructed messages conveyed to girls and women by the media, and identified links between these images and body dissatisfaction. These forms of scholarship and activism have clearly informed participants' strategies for resisting mainstream beauty ideals (see Table 2).

Feminism celebrates bodily diversity. Mainstream imagery and popular discourse about women's appearance limits how we see women's beauty and appearance by privileging one aesthetic ideal—the young, extremely thin, Anglo-featured women—over all other aesthetic forms. Young feminists participating in the focus group discussions suggested that feminism provides alternative ways of seeing women's beauty, and seeing themselves. One group member explained:

I'm just glad I have that feminist paradigm because, if I didn't have that to sort of fall back on, all I would have is this sort of mainstream sexist standards of beauty and I wouldn't have anything else. I wouldn't have another way to look at it . . . I have a category to put it in besides the ways things are supposed to be.

Feminism appears to be a life-raft in the sea of media imagery. Specifically, feminist perspectives celebrate diversity among women, including body size diversity, which one group member felt shifted her view of women's bodily aesthetics. She stated:

I don't think I would have like been able to look at my body or . . . I don't think I would have been able to do that without feminism because I think it helped me realize that there are different shapes of women.

Furthermore, feminism provides different ways to interpret society's denigration of "the female body." One participant shared with the group a theory she had heard explaining the proliferation of ultrathin models. She explained:

And going back to the whole idea of models not looking typically female, you know, with no hips and everything, that kind of reminds me of some of the stuff Andrea Dworkin writes about. It's kind of off the wall if you've ever read it, but um, just she brings up the idea that maybe society's way of glamorizing these women—they [fashion models] don't really look like women—is an attempt to . . . sort of androgynize women because we're evil. In a very abstract sort of way.

This participant is drawing on specific feminist interpretation of the ultrathin ideal arguing that the culture's valuation of extreme thinness can be read as a rejection of traditional feminine values. The thin body connotes control over one's life, emotions, and desires; a female body is viewed as leaky, excessively sexual, and undisciplined (Trethewey, 1999).

Rational resistance: Examining culture with a feminist scrutiny. Maintaining a critical awareness was one of the most commonly used strategies for resisting cultural messages about women's bodies.

Recognizing them, that's a huge key. Because your whole life you're sort of bombarded with stuff that is internalized without even knowing it, and then like you learn through feminism about, oh yeah, that's not right how we're doing this, it's not right how we're doing this and then you start to totally recognize those images and you're able to stop them and say, hey, I know what this is and that's wrong. I'm not gonna listen to it.

Or as another participant stated, "You examine everything the culture puts forth, and I guess you look at it with a feminist scrutiny." An African American woman participating in the same group linked her feminist scrutiny of cultural messages about women's bodies to the critical race consciousness she had already developed growing up as a Black female in a school that was predominantly White.

Like she said, you're just really critical about everything. I'm already like that, anyway, 'cause race, you know. I went to a school that mostly everybody was White . . . You were kind of like an outsider. I kind of learned that you have to question everything.

Cultural messages about beauty (i.e., what it is, how it should be cultivated, and how it will be rewarded) are often implicitly conveyed through media representations of women. Participants expressed that feminism helps them be more conscious consumers of such cultural messages. They

described how they not only apply this feminist scrutiny to identify cultural messages, but also to catch their negative thoughts about their own or someone else's appearance.

I always catch myself, like, thinking things I shouldn't, and I'm always consciously trying to like prevent that . . . I'm always trying to correct myself . . . You can't help the way you think, but I think it's important to be aware of it and work to fix it.

As this participant described, having identified her own negative and complicit thoughts, she can devise alternative statements that challenge these negative beliefs or ideas, processes referred to in cognitive-behavioral therapy as *thought-stopping* and *covert assertion*, respectively. As these approaches bear such a strong resemblance to cognitive therapeutic approaches, we term this the *rational approach* to resistance.

Limits of rational resistance. Although awareness was discussed as one of the most common strategies of resistance, participants were clear in pointing out the limitations of feminist/critical awareness and cognitive/rational interventions. As one participant explained,

Being a feminist, I've learned so much and I can like rationalize it more. So when I look at myself and I try to judge and say, oh, "I would look great if I just did this or this" . . . I can logically say, "That's stupid. Don't think like that." But I still can't totally prevent the feelings, you know.

This rational approach actually reproduces the mind/body dualism that constitutes Western culture's orientation toward personhood, and psychology and philosophy's privileging of reason over emotions. These strategies "can't totally prevent the feelings," and appear, at best, to be temporarily effective coping strategies that do not promote a radical change in how women *experience* their bodies. In fact, several group members felt this rational approach leads to more distress, as now they not only experience shame about their body, but also feel guilty for continuing to engage in certain hegemonic thoughts and practices when they know better than to do these things. One participant stated:

Before . . . when I wasn't a feminist, I bought it. I bought into the whole you should eat this, you should work out, look beautiful all the time. And now I realized what, that's it's just a bunch of bull, you know. I realize that, but I'm still buying into it, and I feel bad for buying into it, and I'm always analyzing it. And I didn't used to analyze before. I mean I analyze to the point where I'm like, oh my god. It's bad, I'm a bad feminist. What to do?

Data from these focus groups suggest that young feminists have perceived and are struggling with a normalized view of the good feminist—the fictional woman who refuses

to discipline her body to meet mainstream beauty standards, and has learned to unconditionally feel good about herself. As one participant bemoaned:

I feel guilty for being aware [of my body], because I know that it's, it's trivial, and being a feminist I . . . feel, oh, I shouldn't worry about that 'cause I know better. But I still, no matter what I do, it doesn't go away. It's always there (also quoted in Rubin & Nemeroff, 2001, p. 95).

Another participant felt this conflict made her feel "twice as bad as before." Many of the women in this study were ambivalent about rejecting beauty norms, though they thought it was their "feminist duty" to do so.

The head versus the heart: Rational resistance meets aesthetics. But why doesn't rational resistance promote radical change in how these women experience their bodies? Why can't it totally prevent the feelings? The lament of one participant spotlights the source of the problem: "I think they look good, but the more I think about it, I'm like . . . she's probably malnourished. But at the same time, I think it still looks good. I still think it's beautiful" (also quoted in Rubin & Nemeroff, 2001, p. 100). Cognitive strategies do not touch the aesthetic ideal, which has presumably been conditioned through repeated exposure to idealized thin bodies. As Zajonc (1980) has argued, separate processes may underlie preferences (feelings) versus inferences (i.e., conscious, rational thoughts). If this is true with regard to preferences for body shapes, then rational strategies will never be able to modify those aesthetic ideals, although they may help women distance themselves emotionally from such ideals.

Emancipatory strategies of resistance. While participants indicated that *thinking* differently about beauty ideals had only a limited effect on their body image, devising new ways of *inhabiting* their body was described as a more liberating approach. One participant described a strategy she used to celebrate her body: "I do try to feel good about myself. One of the things I do is dance around naked in the morning." Another participant had developed new ways of seeing her own body: "I'm acknowledging [being very curvy] in a more positive way than I used to." While these more liberating strategies are unlikely to turn around years of aesthetic conditioning overnight, they appear to help women experience the possibility of being satisfied with their appearance, even if only temporarily, a point that was poetically articulated by one participant:

I weigh what I weigh and I'm a beautiful woman and I know it, and when I walk around I own it . . . it's there inside me and, it ain't iron clad, it can be messed with by other people, but I know it's there at least, and I'm not giving in.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to understand how young feminist women experience body and beauty ideals, and to explore their strategies for resisting, accommodating, or otherwise negotiating cultural messages about women's bodies. Few studies have examined women's *active* strategies for negotiating cultural messages about body and beauty ideals. Feminist women's experience with challenging women's oppression in general makes them a good starting point for this exploration.

Objectified Body Consciousness

Participants described themselves as constantly aware of and attending to their bodies. Their discussions were consistent with Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) theory of objectification, which describes how through experiences of sexual objectification, women learn to objectify themselves, and as our study demonstrates, to objectify other women as well. However, although women learn to self-objectify themselves and other women, we argue that objectification is certainly not all in their head, nor is it an expression of vanity or narcissism. Group members described their bodies as constantly disciplined by others through looks, comments, and actions, "that make you realize that your body is not acceptable in society." We argue that body consciousness is one of the strategies women use to cope with others' reactions to their body, and thus to protect their self-concept.

Participants described how experiences of objectification during adolescence had formed their conceptions of what it means to be a woman in this society. This finding is congruent with previous research, particularly Daniluk's (1993) phenomenological analysis of sexuality among adult women. Similar to participants in the current study, women in Daniluk's (1993) study found that puberty altered the way men interacted with them, promoting a heightened awareness of their vulnerability to sexual violence. Iris Marion Young (1990) argued that objectification can be considered a *defining* aspect of womanhood in contemporary Western society. Young states:

An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever-present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as a shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention (p. 155).

Indeed, as girls and young women, participants in this study learned that being a woman meant living with sexual objectification.

Feminist Resistance

Women in this study worked hard to resist internalizing cultural messages about women's bodies, such as messages that define what beauty is and who gets to be beautiful.

It may be that participants' feminist lens facilitates central route processing, thus subjecting to greater scrutiny cultural messages that may have once inadvertently or unconsciously affected them through more peripheral processing routes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Women in this study challenged messages that suggest that their bodies are flawed or inadequate, and rejected the notion that they should be defined by their appearance. Using cognitive strategies rooted in feminist thought, they were able to recognize and reframe these complicit thoughts. Although helpful, these cognitive strategies were viewed as limited and insufficient to counter the years of pervasive aesthetic conditioning that formed their notions of beauty. These ideas helped participants develop more adaptive thoughts about their appearance, but did not entirely change their feelings about their body. In fact, the participants described feelings of guilt, or shame, for being feminist and still "buying into" cultural and commercial messages about beauty ideals.

Liz Frost (1999) argued that because women's beauty is valued in society, but "the processes and outcomes of active engagement with their own appearance has often led to women being criticized," women end up experiencing shame and ambivalence for attending to their appearance (p. 117). Frost argued that the denigration of women's "doing looks,"

may have served to deny women a discursive space for self-appreciation of the skills, knowledge, and outcomes of their doing looks. . . . Instead of potential pleasure, denial, guilt, and shame may have become the only possible feelings women can ascribe to this range of activities (p. 118).

Frost believes that second-wave feminism "served to reinforce this negative valuing" (p. 118) by naming virtually all beauty practices as oppressive. We differ from Frost in that we would argue the idea that feminists are "against beauty" probably developed from the backlash against feminism, rather than from the second wave feminist critique of beautification practices. Nonetheless, we agree with Frost who, like other contemporary feminist theorists, has attempted to shift feminist discourse beyond the dichotomy of women as *either* passive victims of social conditioning *or* radical resisters of cultural norms. Indeed, despite their body shame and ambivalence, participants in this study were actively seeking new ways of actually inhabiting their bodies. A few participants described resistance strategies, such as celebrating their bodies through dance or self-affirmations, that seemed to hold promise in terms of helping women actually experience their body in more positive ways.

Barriers to Resistance

For most participants, these groups were their first opportunity to name their own struggles and contradictions with their body image in relation to their feminist identity. Talking with other women struggling with similar concerns

challenged participants' beliefs that body image concerns were trivial, and that good feminists are not concerned with their appearance. In truth, there are tremendous social forces supporting women's engagement with beautification practices and many frightening consequences of resistance, especially for young women. On the other hand, young feminists, particularly White, heterosexual women, struggle with letting go of these practices because they are not only oppressed by them, but they also benefit from them. In a qualitative investigation of these concerns among White, middle-class women with and without eating disorders, Haworth-Hoepfner (1999) found that both groups were well aware of the advantages of accommodating mainstream beauty standards and the consequences of not. For these women, thinness and attractiveness were related to being "listened to more," being viewed as competent, likable, and date-able.

Within current gender/power relations, women's access to power and privilege is often tied to their *accommodation* of mainstream beauty ideals. "Buying into" feminine ideals does give certain women access to power, as women, particularly White heterosexual women, often gain economic and social advantage through relationships with powerful men (Hurtado, 1990). Hierarchies and power differentials are not always clear, and "individuals may be simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged" (Martin & Nakayama, 1999, p. 18). This simultaneity of privilege and oppression seems to be the struggle that many participants in these focus groups are grappling with, and may account for some of their difficulties enacting resistance. If feminists, particularly White upper and middle-class feminists, deny the ways in which accommodating feminine ideals provides women, especially White women, with access to power, albeit in a limited way, we silence the struggles—ambivalence, guilt, and shame—that women experience as they begin to acknowledge and possibly reject these privileges.

We should not underestimate, however, the power of mere exposure to idealized thin bodies. In classic research on the mere exposure effect, Kunst-Wilson and Zajonc (1980) demonstrated that repeated presentation of a stimulus—with no associated outcome, either positive or negative (hence "mere" exposure) increased participants' preference for that stimulus. Aesthetic conditioning affects women at a gut level, and this conditioning will probably be best addressed by generating alternative positive images for women and presenting them as pervasively as possible.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the project was informative in revealing experiences that shape young feminist women's feelings about their body and their multiple strategies of resistance, further research is necessary to determine the relative impact of specific experiences on women's body image, and the relative effectiveness of particular resistance strategies.

Furthermore, because there was no control group of nonfeminist women, it is not clear whether the resistance strategies named by participants are particular to feminist women. The same themes might emerge from similar focus groups with nonfeminist women.

Although there was considerable diversity in terms of the sexual orientation of participants, the majority of participants were young, White, middle-class, nondisabled women, and all were currently students at the university. Thus, this project does not necessarily reflect the experiences of women of color, mature women, working women, disabled women, and/or women from other socioeconomic backgrounds. The realities of racism, classism, able-ism, and ageism intersect with sexism in a way that produces unique body image and beauty concerns among women of color, working-class women, older women, and disabled women. Pregnancy, nursing, and motherhood also have their own unique body image implications. Future research should examine the unique, shared, and intersecting body image concerns of women of color, working-class women, mothers, older women, women with disabilities, and White women.

More needs to be known about diversity among feminists and in feminist identification. This investigation has explored feminists' experience of their bodies. Future research should investigate how feminist identity affects the relationship of the body to other aspects of the self. Little is known about the impact of feminist identity on the self in general. Future research needs to explore how being a feminist affects acquiring and acting on basic values, shapes our bases of self-esteem, and relates to our other social identities.

Implications

How do feminist psychologists support young feminist women's strategies of resistance? Until participating in this study, most group members felt they were alone in their difficulty challenging mainstream beauty ideals. It is our belief that feminist psychologists should try to understand—and not condemn—the conflicts young feminists experience as they negotiate beauty standards. Feminist psychologists can help by sharing their own strategies and struggles in resisting normalized beauty ideals, and by validating young feminists' struggles and celebrating their courage to name and challenge their oppression. Furthermore, feminist psychologists should make visible alternative, positive images of women's beauty, whether in our waiting rooms, our offices, or in our classrooms. Young feminists should also be encouraged to seek nonobjectifying ways to experience their bodies, such as yoga, dance, athletics, or sexual self-exploration. Finally, we applaud the recent spate of resistance-oriented messages from a subset of women in Hollywood. Although their struggles to validate a size 3 rather than a size 0 as acceptable among actresses may seem remote from the reality of the average (size 12) American woman, their efforts

are aimed directly at the aesthetic conditioning that cannot be rationalized away.

Initial submission: November 25, 2002

Initial acceptance: February 17, 2003

Final acceptance: July 25, 2003

NOTE

1. While there is no clear definition of what or who is a third wave feminist, we use the term to refer to a new generation of ideas being produced by feminists (regardless of their age). Rebecca Walker, editor of the third wave anthology *To Be Real*, describes third wave feminists as doing “the difficult work of being real (refusing to be bound by a feminist ideal not of their own making) and telling the truth (honoring the complexity and contradiction in their lives by adding their experiences to the feminist dialogue)” (Walker, 1995, p. xxxiv). For a more in-depth examination of third wave feminism, we recommend the article “Feminism's Third Wave: Surfing to Oblivion?” (Rubin & Nemeroff, 2001), or the special issue of the journal *Hypatia*, volume 12, issue 3, “Third Wave Feminisms.”

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