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"Made This Way for a Reason": Body Satisfaction and Spirituality

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Nine female participants shared their experiences of body satisfaction, spiritual beliefs, and the intersection of these domains. Using phenomenological inquiry, the authors identified 6 themes in participant interviews. The authors discuss ways in which this study extends previous research, in addition to providing suggestions for counseling practice.

Keywords: spirituality, body image, body satisfaction

Researchers have noted that adult women of many ages struggle with body dissatisfaction (Bedford & Johnson, 2006; Duba, Kindsvatter, & Priddy, 2010; Wade, George, & Atkinson, 2009). Moreover, Tieggeman (2004) concluded that body dissatisfaction troubles women at numerous developmental stages, noting that "body dissatisfaction remains remarkably stable for women across much of the adult life span" (p. 38). Researchers have also commented on the common nature of body dissatisfaction among women (Striegel-Moore, Silberstein, & Rodin, 1986). In one study, researchers found that 78% of adult women reported displeasure with their bodies (Bedford & Johnson, 2006). In light of this rampant and persistent body discontent, adult women who express body satisfaction represent a unique and clinically salient perspective.

Deeper understanding of the ways in which some women feel satisfied with their bodies is likely to suggest important clinical directions for counselors who work with body dissatisfied clients. Moreover, an examination of the ways in which some body satisfied women view the connection (or lack thereof) between body image and spiritual beliefs can be informative for counseling practice. Boyatzis & Quinlan (2008) discussed the complex link between spiritual beliefs and body image. Researchers have linked spiritual beliefs with both increased (Mahoney et al., 2005) and decreased (Boyatzis & McConnell, 2006) body satisfaction. In this study, we conducted a qualitative inquiry into nine body satisfied female participants' views about spiritual beliefs, body image, and the connection between the domains. Before discussing these qualitative findings, we summarize the literature on body satisfaction among adult women, including defining body image, noting risk factors for body dissatisfaction, and highlighting

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negative outcomes associated with body dissatisfaction. In addition, we discuss previous research on the intersection of body satisfaction and spirituality and the mixed findings regarding this relationship.

BODY SATISFACTION

Researchers have discussed the multidimensional nature of body image (Cash, 1994; Pruzinsky & Cash, 2002). Body image involves both (a) body image evaluation, which refers to an individual's cognitive and emotional appraisal of one's body size and shape; and (b) body image investment, which is the degree to which an individual prioritizes physical appearance (Cash, 1994, 2002). Petrie, Tripp, and Harvey (2002) measured body satisfaction as the degree to which an individual feels subjective pleasure regarding one's body size and shape, specifically with areas of the body that can be altered through efforts such as eating habits and exercise. Body dissatisfaction occurs when there is an incongruity between one's optimal body size and shape and one's actual body size and shape (Wade et al., 2009).

Thompson and Stice (2001) noted that thin-ideal internalization is a predictor of body dissatisfaction. Individuals who internalize thinness accept and seek thinness as a valuable goal (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999; Thompson & Stice, 2001). Thompson & Stice (2001) underscored that media pressures to attain a slim body are likely to foster this internalization of thinness. In a meta-analysis, Groesz, Levine, and Murnen (2002) concluded that the thin body size in the media negatively affects female body satisfaction. Although media depictions of thinness may motivate women to achieve thinness for goals of physical beauty, individuals may also associate life success and happiness with the thin-body ideal (Evans, 2003).

Researchers have linked body dissatisfaction with a range of negative outcomes. In a meta-analysis of eating disorder risk factors, Stice (2002) concluded that body dissatisfaction "emerged as one of the most consistent and robust risk and maintenance factors for eating pathology" (p. 832). Among women, Petrie et al. (2002) found that body dissatisfaction was associated with increased feelings of depression, guilt, and shame, and diminished happiness and confidence. Given the prevalence and consequences of body dissatisfaction, we endeavored to gain insight into the mechanisms by which some women develop and persist in body satisfied attitudes. In addition to exploring participants' views about their bodies, we were also interested in the ways in which body satisfied female participants viewed the possible connection between spirituality and body image.

BODY SATISFACTION AND SPIRITUALITY

Spiritual beliefs are a salient factor in some women's levels of body satisfaction (Boyatzis & Quinlan, 2008). Researchers documented both favorable and unfa-

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vorable outcomes based on the content and type of spiritual belief (e.g., Boyatzis & McConnell, 2006; Mahoney et al., 2005). Quest religiosity (i.e., doubts and change in spirituality and concern with meaning of life; Batson & Schoenrade, 1991), a belief that God/Higher Power is distant during times of stress, and insecure attachment to God were linked to decreased body satisfaction (Boyatzis & McConnell, 2006; Buser & Bernard, in press; Homan & Boyatzis, 2010). Alternatively, beliefs in the sanctity of one's body, beliefs in the role of God in creating one's body, and trust in God/Higher Power's partnership during stress were associated with increased body satisfaction (Boyatzis, Kline, & Backof, 2007; Buser & Bernard, in press; Mahoney et al., 2005). Rubin, Fitts, and Becker (2003) reported on a theme among a focus group of Latina and African American female participants, wherein spiritual beliefs about a sacred body were helpful in accepting one's body. Specifically, Rubin et al. (2003) noted that participants' spiritual beliefs about being the "custodian of something precious" were beneficial (p. 57). For example, one participant viewed her body as "a temple of God" and discussed her efforts to take care of her body by "treating what I have as something that's precious" (Rubin et al., 2003, p. 59).

Other researchers, however, reported null or mixed findings about the link between body image and spirituality among adult women (Boyatzis, Trevino, Manning, & Quinlan, 2006; Hayman et al., 2007). Additional research is needed to better understand the ways in which participants regard the connection between body satisfaction and spiritual beliefs. The varied results noted above may be informed by qualitative research, which allows participants to share their in-depth personal experiences. As Boyatzis and Quinlan (2008) stated, "Women's own words may be crucial for elucidating *how and why* religion may be related to women's body image and eating behavior. Qualitative data also capture how complicated these issues are" (p. 202). In the present study, participants reflected on the multifaceted, nuanced relationship between their body image attitudes and their spiritual beliefs.

METHOD

Participants

Nine female participants volunteered to take part in this study. Participants ranged in age from young adult to middle age (mean age = 27.22 years). All participants were students at a private, mid-Atlantic university. We provide truncated demographic data to protect participant confidentiality. Most participants identified as White/Caucasian; others identified as African American and Hispanic/Latina or chose not to answer. Participants represented all academic class standings (1st year to graduate student). All participants identified as heterosexual. Most participants identified as middle class; others identified as working class and upper middle class. A majority of participants identified as Catholic; others identified as Protestant, Agnostic, or "other" faith/religious tradition. Participants reported a mean body mass index (BMI) of 21.38, which is in the normal weight category (World Health Organization, 2012).

Instrument

Participants completed a demographic form and the Body Parts Satisfaction Scale–Revised (BPSS-R; Petrie et al., 2002); the Satisfaction with Body subscale of the BPSS-R assesses female body satisfaction with seven specific body parts. Petrie et al. (2002) established concurrent and construct validity for this subscale; the authors reported positive correlations with body satisfaction and negative links with body shame, body image disturbance, disordered eating, and weight fluctuations. Petrie et al. (2002) reported reliability for the BPSS-R Satisfaction with Body subscale as .90. In the present study, reliability for this subscale was .86. Possible BPSS-R subscale scores ranged from 1 (*extremely dissatisfied*) to 6 (*extremely satisfied*). Study participants endorsed high levels of body satisfaction; the participant mean BPSS-R Satisfaction with Body subscale score was 4.9 (SD = .64).

Procedure

We secured institutional review board approval and began data collection. Our data recruitment efforts involved follow-up contacts to potential participants who took part in a previous quantitative study and indicated interest in being contacted for a follow-up interview on certain topics (e.g., spirituality and body image). While we disseminated a call for participants on several websites, all participants came from these follow-up contacts. Participants who expressed interest in an interview were contacted by the first author via e-mail to set up a screening phone call. In this study, we included only participants who endorsed spiritual and/or religious beliefs, body satisfaction, and no past/current eating disorder symptoms. Hill et al. (2000) asserted that spirituality and religion both emphasize the sacred portions of life, but noted that religion also includes communal practice. We asked participants to discuss their spiritual and/or religious beliefs, but we use the term *spirituality* in this article, because not all participants identified with a faith community or endorsed religious rituals.

Participants chose either a phone (n = 2) or in-person (n = 7) interview with one of the researchers. Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. We used a semistructured interview protocol; interviews were guided by participant responses (Moustakas, 1994), but several questions served as guides, including (a) What are your spiritual/religious beliefs? (b) How do you feel about your body? and (c) Do you see a connection between your spiritual/religious beliefs and your views about your body? In what ways do you see such a connection? In creating the guiding questions for the interviews, we aimed to approach participant stories from an exploratory posture; in the spirit of phenomenological inquiry, we sought to limit the influence of our own biases and perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, our interview questions were intentionally broad, inviting participants to share their experiences about body satisfaction, spiritual beliefs, and the connection between these domains. The second author or an outside transcriptionist transcribed the interviews. We encountered recording difficulties with two tapes and used our notes to account for missing sections. Following the interview, participants completed the BPSS-R (Petrie et al. 2002).

Data Analysis

Before and after the interviews, we met to discuss our assumptions. We worked to remain aware of our assumptions and biases throughout the research process in order to prevent preconceptions from unduly affecting the research (Moustakas, 1994). We both identified as female and as being personally aware and critical of the body pressures and expectations of thinness for females, particularly those generated by the media. The second author noted an assumption that most body satisfied participants would already conform to the media ideal and have a thin body shape. We both identified as having spiritual beliefs that shifted over time. The first author identified a preconception that most body satisfied participants would report a positive influence of spiritual beliefs on their body attitudes.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is interested in the "meaning and essences" of participant experiences (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21). Specifically, we used Moustakas's (1994) adaptation of an analysis method termed the *Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen* process. After becoming cognizant of our assumptions about the data, we first completed an open coding procedure for each transcript. In approaching the data, we followed the guidelines of Wertz (2005), who noted that empathy, openness, and separation from personal biases are essential in data analysis. Once we reached consensus on codes, we identified meaning units, or "each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). Following agreement on meaning units, we identified and reached consensus on themes in each transcript. Then, we created a textural-structural description of each participant's experience. This description attended to the textures of the participant's experience, including participant quotes (Moustakas, 1994). It also reflected our deep engagement with each transcript; as Wertz (2005) explained, "the phenomenological researcher does not remain content to grasp the obvious or explicit meanings but reads between the lines and deeply interrogates in order to gain access to implicit dimensions of the experience-situation complex" (p. 172). Following agreement on the textual-structural descriptions, we created a composite textural-structural description for the experiences of all participants (Moustakas, 1994).

All participants who took part in this study were contacted to validate the data (Moustakas, 1994). Three participants responded to and expressed agreement with the themes and offered additional thoughts. After this validation effort, we returned to the data and integrated participant responses into the themes of the final textural-structural description.

RESULTS

Through phenomenological analysis, we identified six themes. These themes spanned participant spirituality, body image, and the intersection of these domains. In particular, we identified the following themes: (a) a spiritual journey,

(b) keeping body image in perspective, (c) detachment from the media, (d) novelty of the spirituality–body image connection, (e) limits to personal control over body, and (f) rational thought in both spirituality and body image. In the fifth theme, wherein participants noted the limits to personal control over their bodies, we identified two subthemes. In particular, participants discussed genetic and/or spiritual limitations to body control.

Spiritual Journey

Most participants discussed a spiritual journey, wherein they examined, struggled with, or changed their beliefs. All currently professed a spiritual belief system; some participants shared that they were in a questioning phase of their faith, whereas others expressed more surety about their beliefs. Because of space considerations and our research foci, we did not explain this theme in depth. Yet, we felt it was important to note this commonality across many interviews.

Keeping Body Image in Perspective

Most participants discussed keeping their body image in perspective, in that they did not prioritize body size and shape. Some participants described a current or past time of wanting to change certain body parts. For example, one participant explained: "Sometimes it is like I will work on my stomach. Okay. And then my thighs probably, okay. It is different body preference." These desires for body change, however, were never expressed as an obsessive or all-consuming need. Rather, participants phrased these wishes as fleeting thoughts or feelings. The same aforementioned participant explained: "I am satisfied with how I am. It is not like that drastic to me that I would want to change."

In addition, many participants voiced a choice to keep body image in perspective, noting that other facets of their life were more important. For example, one participant said:

> I mean, your weight compared to, like, the time that you could spend with your family. It's like really different. . . . Why are you wasting your time staring in the mirror for an hour saying I hate my body, I hate my body, whatever, when you could just be doing good things like spending it with friends, spending it with your family, or even doing your homework or doing important things?

Another participant, noting how her mother expressed a different view about life priorities, shared this sentiment: "She was so obsessed with appearances. She was even more obsessed with appearances and she was never obsessed about the meat and potatoes of what it is to be a whole human being that we always clashed about that."

Detachment from the Media

Many participants discussed detachment from the media. Some participants described understanding the falsity of media images. For example, one par-

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ticipant said, "Right, like how many supermodels look like how they look on magazines covers!" and later noted "So, it is photoshopped!" Another participant commented on the unhealthiness of models: "It is not natural and it is not beautiful. There is nothing beautiful about being so skinny that you could die. There is nothing great about it."

Other participants discussed an ability to distance themselves from media images by not automatically assuming their bodies should mimic models. These participants talked about viewing their bodies as inherently different from media images. For example, one participant said: "I mean, you look at them, and it's fantastic, and you say those are the legs I want. But, I'm only 5'4", you know what I mean? I can't figure out how I am going to be 6 feet tall!"

Novelty of the Spirituality–Body Image Connection

The vast majority of participants expressed surprise and/or uncertainty when asked to reflect on the potential connection between their body image and spirituality. Several participants initially rejected the idea that these two areas of their lives were connected. Yet, most participants ultimately discussed ways in which their spiritual beliefs and body image were related.

For example, one participant said, "No, I actually never really thought about that," but later in the interview spoke about ways in which being a creation of God informed her body image. Another participant started with "I never like thought about that" before reflecting on a connection. Similarly, another participant voiced: "Um, I never thought of the two being connected. But, maybe so," subsequently going on to make a link between spiritual beliefs and body image. As the interview closed, one participant noted the uniqueness of this conversation:

> I think talking about these two subjects because it is something that is a part of most peoples' lives, but is rarely discussed like this. It is nice to be able to talk about it freely from nonjudgment and even to assess my own beliefs and how my spirituality enforces my body image. I never really thought about that. That was kind of eye-opening.

Limits to Personal Control Over Body

A theme common to most participant experiences was a recognition and acceptance of the limits of personal control over their bodies. This limitation was discussed as a force outside the participant's agency having an influence on body size and shape. Participants described this as a genetic and/or spiritual force and expressed the benefits of this outside power limiting their own efforts for body change.

Genetic limits. Many participants discussed how their body size and shape were determined by genetic and biological forces. One participant noted that "my metabolism is so fast" as a primary explanation for her weight and another participant echoed this belief in her "metabolism" being in control of her weight.

Another participant explained how she moved to a place of body satisfaction after being dissatisfied with her body in the past; she shared, "then it was kind of like, when I was born a certain way. There is only so much that I can do. I cannot completely change my body. I need to just like accept it and be happy." This participant also noted some agency in changing her body, commenting that she focused on "working out a little more," but simultaneously emphasized the benefits of giving up some control.

Another participant also expressed this blend: "Hey, this is the way that it is! And I am going to work with it the best that I can! I don't, I'm not gonna look like a supermodel." This participant noted a personal agency to "work with" her body, but to do so within external limits. Thus, whereas some participants gave full agency to genetic and biological forces in determining body size and shape, others voiced a blend of personal accountability and external responsibility.

Spiritual limits. In addition to participants who discussed the genetic limitations to their body size and shape, another theme common in many interviews was a belief in a spiritual force that exerted control over body size and shape. One participant expressed views about God's sovereign role in her body size and shape. This participant noted, "God has a way of knowing what people can handle" and viewed her happiness with her weight as a result of God's actions and knowledge that she is struggling with other life difficulties: "He knows I have other issues on my plate, I think, you know, bigger, if not just as big, you know, issues on my plate."

Another participant rooted her body satisfaction in her belief in being God's creation: "[I] was never like 'oh God make me skinny' because at the same time He made me how I am. So I am satisfied with how I am." Another participant reflected on God's role in her appearance:

> I just feel like maybe I am a certain way for a reason and God wants me to be happy with myself. I should not be freaking out about the way I look and just understanding that and I am made this way for a reason. It is more comforting.

Other participants also discussed a spiritual force having agency with regard to their bodies, but also endorsed a degree of personal responsibility. One participant described her spiritual beliefs as including the idea that "in the end I know that everything will be the way it's supposed to be and things happen for a reason." She reflected that this spiritual belief has an impact on her body image.

> What's meant to be will happen, those kinds of things, like if I'm meant to lose that weight, then I knew that I would. And if not, then I knew that it was my body changing kind of thing. So I knew that it was a work in progress and that it would take time to see whether that is what was going to happen.

This participant also talked about her efforts to monitor her body shape, such as engaging in yoga, but this personal effort was tempered by an awareness of a spiritual force having some control over her body. Another participant noted that "I am thankful that God gave me what I have." This participant also expressed a belief in a blend of personal and divine control: "I think that [God] left it up to us to decide how to deal with what we were given." Interestingly, while this participant seemed cognizant of a connection between spirituality and body image in the interview, this connection may not have been clear to her yet. She shared agreement with the themes during the member check and noted, "When interviewed, I didn't think of any connection but can now see how they are interrelated."

All participants seemed to view this external spiritual control as benevolent, in that God or another spiritual power had compassionate intentions in exerting agency over body size and shape. For example, as one participant expressed, there is comfort that goes along with believing God created her to look a specific way, "because if I accept that God made me this way and there is a reason why I look like this and I am built this way that it is more comforting, I guess."

Rational Thought in Spirituality and Body Image

Some participants expressed a rational and realistic belief system that seemed to link their views of spirituality and their approach to body image. For example, several discussed realistic spiritual/religious views. One participant rejected the idea of subscribing to a specific religious dogma and not accounting for the practical impact of beliefs. In describing how she is raising her children with spiritual beliefs, she noted,

> I am hoping that as they get older that what they remember about religion is that religion is what is right and what is wrong. And who am I hurting? Things like that. And instead of what is I can quote the book of whatever!

Another participant talked about how her rational thought blends with her spiritual beliefs: "So, I think the science and God are completely compatible. . . . I've always been very rational." Another participant noted her approach to Catholicism: "I feel like I have a more modern take on it because times are changing and we all need to kind of accept it."

This rational and realistic viewpoint was also evident in many comments about body image. Participants spoke about not allowing large amounts of time to be devoted to body image and not using extreme methods to lose weight. One participant described this plainly: "I think I'm very rational, and I don't think to the extremes, like, you know, I'm going to cut out bread from my diet like some people do. I could never do that, so that wasn't even an option." Yet, among participants who expressed rational thoughts in both spiritual beliefs and body image views, few overtly linked these two domains in this way.

DISCUSSION

We examined the ways in which body satisfied adult women understood their bodies, spiritual beliefs, and the connection between the two constructs. We identified six themes in participant interviews. In the following section, we discuss the ways in which these themes extend previous research, provide insights for future research, and may inform clinical practice.

Consistent with the findings of Rubin et al. (2003), participants in our study differentiated their own bodies from the media ideal of thinness. These authors noted that Latina and African American female participants chose to view their bodies in ways divergent from the "dominant culture" where "thinness has arguably become a key defining aspect of beauty" (p. 55). In rejecting these cultural definitions of beauty, participants in the Rubin et al. study defined beauty differently; participants spoke about personal style and self-care, for example, as being more important than thinness. Participants also discussed the role of the media in perpetuating inaccurate, stereotypical, and/or absent images of women of color; some participants critically examined the media patterns and noted their own "alienation from mainstream representations" (Rubin et al., 2003, p. 63).

In our research, a key aspect of participant body satisfaction appeared to be an ability to separate oneself from a media standard of thinness. Similar to the critiques of the media images of women of color in the Rubin et al. (2003) study, most current study participants talked about not applying media images to their own bodies. Participants in our research also discussed an awareness of the ways in which media images are altered.

Moreover, most of our research participants did not name their body image as being a crucial element of self-identity. In a similar fashion to the Rubin et al. (2003) research participants, who chose beauty standards divergent from the ideal of thinness, our study participants rejected the assumption that success and happiness are tied to a thin body (Evans, 2003). The idea of worrying about one's body being a "waste of time" was an implied or directly stated comment in many interviews, suggesting that prioritizing one's body takes time and energy away from important life elements. Cash (1994) termed the personal importance that individuals place on their physical appearance as the *investment* aspect of body image and found that this factor was a significant variable in predicting body dissatisfaction. The current study participants seemed to place minimal importance on having a specific body size or shape, in comparison to other life areas and goals.

In addition to supporting research on female body satisfaction, our results also offered insights regarding the ways in which body image and spiritual beliefs are connected. The majority of study participants reported a connection between body image and spirituality. Overall, most participants initially voiced a sense that there was no connection between spiritual beliefs and body image and/or noted that they

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had never thought about such a connection. After reflection, most participants discussed ways in which such a connection was present. This finding is congruent with qualitative results reviewed by Boyatzis et al. (2006). These authors noted that, among female participants who wrote essays about religion/spirituality, body image, and eating attitudes, many evinced an incongruous thought pattern. For example, some participants initially asserted the absence of a link between their body image and spiritual beliefs, but later described such a connection. These results confirm assertions that qualitative inquiries are especially well suited for this area of research (Boyatzis & Quinlan, 2008); methods such as individual interviews allow participants time to reflect and think about spirituality and body image, rather than responding instinctively and possibly dismissing a relevant association.

Participants who did acknowledge a connection between body image and spirituality overwhelmingly discussed the ways that their spiritual beliefs were beneficial. No participant reported a way in which spiritual beliefs were harmful or damaging in relation to body attitudes. This coincides with conclusions reached by Boyatzis and Quinlan (2008). Yet, the empirical literature still presents a mixed picture of the link between spirituality and body image (Boyatzis & Quinlan, 2008), and our qualitative findings may be able to offer some insights about these results. Not all researchers have used measures of spirituality that specifically tap an individual's spiritual beliefs that have particular relevance for body image. For example, Hayman et al. (2007) found no relation between spirituality and body image among female participants; these authors used a measure of faith maturity that had no explicit relation to the role of spiritual beliefs in informing body image. Boyatzis et al. (2007) and Mahoney et al. (2005) investigated spiritual beliefs explicitly involving body image (e.g., the belief in one's body being made in God's image) and found a link between these beliefs and increased body satisfaction. The current study participants' spiritual beliefs, as related to body satisfaction, often involved a benevolent force having some control over their bodies. Thus, future quantitative researchers may want to study spiritual beliefs with overt relevance to body image, such as a belief in a spiritual force having some influence over an individual's body.

Counseling Implications

Participants discussed a sense of limited control over their bodies. This restricted control was framed as a genetic and/or a spiritual limitation. The genetic limitation was often discussed as the sense of accepting one's body based on the knowledge that one is born with a certain body that is largely determined by genetics. The spiritual limitation was often expressed as belief in a greater spiritual force who created the participant and/or who had some degree of control over her body. Overall, whether it was couched in the terms of a genetic reason or spiritual force, participants seemed to accept not having full control over their body size and shape. Possibly, accepting that they have external constraints placed on their ability to change their body size and shape protected participants from desiring

a drastically different body. Thus, they may have been moved to accept their present body as a result of this awareness of limited control.

Brownell (1991) underscored the cultural fiction about one's body size and shape being malleable and able to be altered to meet a thin ideal. Researchers linked a belief in body malleability to females' desires and efforts for body change (Ogle, Lee, & Damhorst, 2005). Thus, counseling interventions that address the genetic and/or spiritual limits to body change may help body dissatisfied clients attain body acceptance. Such interventions may disabuse clients of the belief that their body is completely within their control. Brownell (1982) discussed set-point theory as a theory that recognizes the role of genetics in determining weight: "The set point acts much like a home thermostat that regulates the temperature around an ideal" (p. 822). Counselors can discuss set-point theory with clients. The National Eating Disorders Association (2005) created a handout titled "Every Body is Different," which is guided by core suppositions of set-point theory and may be clinically useful.

As noted previously, many participants framed the spirituality–body image link as a belief in a compassionate spiritual force having a degree of control over one's body. This spiritual belief may be comforting and relieving to clients. In particular, a client who believes that God/Higher Power or another spiritual force bears full or partial responsibility for an individual's body may be able to avoid societal pressure to meet a body ideal. The way in which spiritual beliefs can offer protection from body change desires was also evident in the Rubin et al. (2003) study, but our participants voiced a different thought process. Rubin et al. (2003) discussed participants' belief in a sacred body as engendering a sense of agency; participants felt they were "the custodian of something precious" (p. 57). For our participants, the involvement of a caring spiritual force seemed to permit relinquishing of all or some body control. Rather than feeling responsible guarding and protecting their bodies, the primary theme was a sense of the limits of their own agency. Thus, for spiritual clients, discussing the spiritual limits of body malleability may be a useful area of exploration, alongside discussing the genetic limits of body manipulation.

Given our findings, wherein most participants did not make an immediate spirituality–body image connection, counselors may want to initiate a conversation about spirituality and body image; a client's spiritual beliefs may be relevant to her body image, but she may not have associated these domains. For example, a client may be able to share a belief in certain spiritual tenets (e.g., the idea of God as caring, the belief in God as in control), which she had not consciously applied to her body. The counselor can provide an open, accepting, patient presence as the client explores these connections. In our study, several participants voiced a rational thought pattern that was common to both their spiritual beliefs and their body image views. A body dissatisfied client who discusses a rational, realistic spiritual belief system may be assisted by thinking about how to apply this thought pattern to struggles with body dissatisfaction.

Strengths and Limitations

As other phenomenological researchers noted, our study is limited in its ability to generalize beyond current participants (Brumfield & Christensen, 2011). Also, given that all participants in this study attended one institution, future researchers may want to recruit participants from different regions to ascertain if these themes are pertinent to other body satisfied women. The strengths of our study include a qualitative methodology that attended to the complex, individual experiences of participants. Qualitative methods have been highlighted as being germane to the exploration of body image and spirituality (Boyatzis & Quinlan, 2008). Phenomenology, requiring that researchers engage deeply with data (Moustakas, 1994), may be especially salient.

CONCLUSION

Study participants shared a range of reflections on their body image and spirituality. Many discussed keeping their body image in perspective and not allowing it to take priority over other life concerns. In addition, many participants shared how they detached themselves from the media, choosing to not apply media images and messages to their own bodies. Moreover, most participants also discussed the limits of personal control over their bodies, citing genetic and/or spiritual forces as having agency in determining their body size and shape. Although many participants initially expressed surprise, confusion, or rejection of a spirituality–body image link, most ultimately discussed a relationship between these domains. Many participants viewed this spirituality–body image connection as a benevolent spiritual force having a degree of control over their bodies. Some participants also discussed a rational thought pattern that connected both domains.

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