Feminist Identity in Relation to Non-Suicidal Self Injury and Body Dissatisfaction

Katie Johnson  Psychology & Women’s Studies
Jennifer J. Muehlenkamp  Faculty Mentor  Psychology

Introduction

- Non-suicidal self-injury (e.g., intentional destruction of body tissue without suicidal intent; NSSI) is a growing problem, and is quite prevalent among college females (Whitlock et al., 2012).
- High levels of body dissatisfaction are often frequently reported by women, and believed to contribute to significant risk for disordered eating behaviors (Cash & Smolak, 2012). Body dissatisfaction has also been associated with higher rates of NSSI (Muehlenkamp, 2012).
- Objectification theory proposes that sociocultural pressures and objectification of women's bodies cause women to self-objectify, adopting an outsider's view of themselves (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).
- Engaging in a high amount of self-objectification is thought to increase women's tendency to engage in body surveillance (habitual self-monitoring of body appearance). Both self-objectification and surveillance are believed to place women at increased risk for body dissatisfaction and non-suicidal self-injury (Muehlenkamp et al. 2005; Tylka et al., 2010).
- There is evidence that feminism may provide some protection against body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, perhaps because feminism empowers women to reject oppressive social messages, assert their opinions, and voice their desires (Chrisler 2011).
- Prior research has documented the protective effects of feminism empowerment in reducing body image disturbances and disordered eating practices (Peterson et al. 2008). However, there are no known studies examining the possible protective association between feminist identity and NSSI.
- The objective of this project was to examine the relationships between feminist identity, perceived social pressures, self-objectification tendencies, and both NSSI and body dissatisfaction.

Hypotheses

1. We expected that a stronger level of feminist identity would negatively correlate with non-suicidal self-injury, body dissatisfaction, body surveillance, and internalization of sociocultural pressures.
2. We expected individuals high on stigma consciousness of feminism would show lower scores on the feminist identity scale.
3. We expected that a high level of stigma consciousness would be positively correlated with non-suicidal self-injury, body dissatisfaction, internalization of sociocultural pressures, and body surveillance.

Method

- 186 female students (mean age = 19.97, SD = 1.71), were recruited from psychology and women’s studies courses completed an on-line survey assessing feminist identity, self-objectification, surveillance, internalization of sociocultural pressures, perceived feminist stigma, NSSI, and body dissatisfaction.
- Survey completion took approximately 15 minutes.

Results

Hypothesis 1:

Table 1: Correlation to Active Commitment Feminist Identity

| Coefficient | Body Surveillance | .115 | Internalization of Sociocultural Pressures | -.200** | Body Appreciation | .055 | Non-Suicidal Self Injury Severity | -.218** |

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**

Hypothesis 2:

Stronger feminist identities: Active commitment and Synthesis were negatively associated with internalization of sociocultural pressures and NSSI, supporting hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 3:

Stronger feminist identities: Active commitment and Synthesis were negatively associated with internalization of sociocultural pressures and NSSI, supporting hypothesis 1.

Discussion

Our results mostly supported our hypotheses, suggesting that having a stronger feminist identity may be protective against mental health problems such as body dissatisfaction and NSSI. However, experiencing feminist-related stigma and prejudice is likely to reduce an individual's likelihood of identifying as a feminist; thus, indirectly increasing risk for internalizing sociocultural pressures, body surveillance, and self-objectification. Engaging in these practices appears to be associated with greater body dissatisfaction and NSSI. Additional research is needed to replicate and confirm our findings.