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“I Kinda Feel Like Wonder Woman”: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Pole Fitness and Positive Body Image

Ariel J. Dimler, Kimberley McFadden, and Tara-Leigh F. McHugh
University of Alberta

The purpose of this research was to describe and interpret the positive body image experiences of women actively engaged in pole fitness. A total of seven women between the ages of 20 and 36 years participated in semistructured one-on-one interviews and follow-up interviews. Participant observation was also used to generate data. Data were analyzed using an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach, and the positive body image experiences of women are represented by five themes: (a) observation and exposure fostering body acceptance, (b) performance promoting self-confidence, (c) personal growth and sexual expression, (d) unconditional community support creates comfort, and (e) body appreciation through physical skill development. Findings suggest that women engaging in pole fitness may experience positive body image, and the words of participants provide insight into the components of pole fitness that may foster positive body image. Pole fitness may provide a unique exercise context whereby women can develop and maintain positive body image.

Keywords: exercise, interviews, observation, pole fitness, positive body image, qualitative, women

In recent years, pole dancing as exercise (pole fitness) has become an increasingly popular physical activity, particularly among young women (Holland & Attwood, 2009). This exercise context is generally promoted as a means for participants to create a positive relationship with their body by building strength and flexibility through sensual dance movement (Donaghue, Kurz, & Whitehead, 2011). The increased popularity and promotion of such exercise coincide with the increased emphasis on how to develop positive body image, especially among those who already possess, or may be at risk of developing, negative body self-perceptions (Castonguay, Gilchrist, Mack, & Sabiston, 2013). If pole fitness does positively impact how a woman feels about her body, this exercise context may be an avenue for interventions to promote and build positive body image. However, the exploration of positive body image, when compared with negative body image, is relatively new within the body image literature (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). Therefore, it is important to better understand how individuals experience positive body image, as well as to explore unique contexts in which positive body image may be fostered, such as pole fitness.

According to Cash and Smolak (2011), body image is complex and multidimensional, and is made up of affective, behavioral, perceptual, and cognitive components of body experience. To date, most researchers who have examined body image have focused on negative aspects, with a particular emphasis on associated constructs, such as body dissatisfaction (Cook-Cottone & Phelps, 2003). However, in recent years, positive psychology perspectives have influenced how body image is understood, with more researchers focusing specifically on positive body image (Castonguay et al., 2013). Researchers such as Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath (2010) described how positive body image is often conceptualized as merely the absence of negative body image, but they argued that positive body image is a distinct construct with unique signifiers. More specifically, Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015b) argued that positive and negative body images are not on the same continuum, whereby having low negative body image does not translate to high positive body image. Instead, it is possible to experience body dissatisfaction, a measure of negative body image, while at the same time experiencing some components of positive body image, namely respect and appreciation for the body (Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013).

Although the study of positive body image is gaining momentum, there is relatively little consensus on how it should be defined or conceptualized. Positive body image has typically been operationalized as body

Ariel J. Dimler, Kimberley McFadden, and Tara-Leigh F. McHugh are with the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Address author correspondence to Tara-Leigh F. McHugh at tmchugh@ualberta.ca.

appreciation or body satisfaction (Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005). The Body Appreciation Scale focuses on the body appreciation aspect of positive body image, yet it does not necessarily support an understanding of other potential characteristics or facets of positive body image that have been identified in recent qualitative research (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). As suggested by Avalos et al. (2005), researchers should consider the use of qualitative research designs to support the examination of positive body image, as such research can generate themes that would facilitate an in-depth understanding of the complexity of this construct.

Recognizing the need for a comprehensive understanding of positive body image, Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) proposed a definition of positive body image that includes antecedents, maintenance factors, and consequences. Conceptualized as an overarching love and respect for the body, Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) described how positive body image allows individuals to appreciate their body's unique beauty and function, accept or even admire their body, and feel beautiful and confident. Furthermore, positive body image allows individuals to emphasize their body's assets, have a mindful connection with their body's needs, and interpret incoming information in a body-protective manner. Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015b) described how positive body image is nuanced by the extent to which it may protect well-being and how it is shaped by unique social identities. Social identity refers to a person's perception of their "oneness with a group" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 20), and Tiggemann (2015) explained that by examining what positive body image might "look like" for various groups, including special populations such as dancers, it may be possible to gain an in-depth understanding of experiences of positive body image. Researchers have suggested that participating in certain forms of dance or "embodying" activities (i.e., activities that promote a sense of ownership and respect of the body) may facilitate positive body image (Tiggemann, Coutts, & Clark, 2014; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009). This study was focused on women who actively participated in pole fitness because pole fitness has been identified as an embodying activity and context that may enhance positive body image (Whitehead & Kurz, 2009). As such, by focusing this study on women who actively participate in pole fitness, it may be possible to better understand the complexities of positive body image.

According to Holland (2010), it is difficult to identify when pole dancing was initially offered in the form of exercise classes, but there has been rapid growth in the popularity and prevalence of pole fitness over the past 10 years. She described how pole fitness is more than just dancing or performing tricks on a pole; pole fitness involves athleticism, artistry, and skill (Holland, 2010). Given the surge in popularity of pole fitness, this has spurred some researchers to examine the psychological and social impacts of this exercise context. For instance, through the voices of instructors and participants of pole classes, Holland (2010) described how women espouse

liberation and initiate agency with respect to their bodies, age, and gender. Contrary to expectations of gendered exercise contexts (i.e., those contexts that are stereotypically perceived as women's exercise), such as various forms of dance and group exercise/fitness classes (McGannon & Spence, 2012), women in pole classes are "often red-faced and sweating, of varying ages and sizes. . . . It is mostly not glamorous" (Holland, 2010, p. 3). Pole classes have been criticized in academic and public domains for being too sexual and part of the sex industry, yet women in Holland's research described how pole classes provided them with opportunities to resist gendered and embodied expectations. Within western cultures, there is a gendered expectation for young women to be feminine, which includes expectations of being a nurturer, dependent, helpless, and physically inactive (Choi, 2000). Women in western cultures are expected to be thin, youthful, and sexy (Boyd & Murnen, 2017; Grogan, 2017) as well, and they are often depicted as sexual objects to be desired by heterosexual men (Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008). Women are regularly faced with unrealistic expectations and body ideals that are unattainable for most women, and, unsurprisingly, when compared with men, women in western cultures experience greater body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann, 2004). As argued by women in Holland's study, the pole fitness context encourages women to be physically active in ways that support them in resisting such gendered expectations.

Aside from the work of Holland, the majority of existing literature on pole fitness has focused on the social issue of whether or not pole fitness succeeds in "empowering" participants or if it is simply another arena for the objectification of women, whereby women's bodies are evaluated and inspected by others. For example, Bahri (2012) argued that pole fitness classes and competitions work to maintain distance from the negative social stigmas associated with "actual" pole dancing, and choosing to pole dance for fun and fitness is empowering. Evans, Riley, and Shankar (2010) also argued that, although activities such as pole fitness may work to subvert gender norms, they are still required to draw on, and, therefore, perpetuate, "dominant discourses of female sexuality, including objectification" (pp. 126–127). Objectification theory posits that women within western cultures are constantly looked at, evaluated, and potentially objectified (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Subsequently, women learn to internalize these views and may begin to treat themselves as objects to be evaluated, a process known as self-objectification. Self-objectification is problematic in that it can contribute to appearance anxiety and body shame (Slater & Tiggemann, 2002). Although researchers have suggested that pole fitness may perpetuate objectification (Evans et al. 2010), Tiggemann et al. (2014) found that women who participated in belly dance (i.e., another embodying dance form) scored lower on self-objectification and higher on positive body image when compared with a group of college women. Therefore, although focused on

a different dance form, findings from Tiggemann et al. (2014) suggested that participating in such embodying activities may indeed reduce self-objectification and enhance positive body image.

Researchers have highlighted critical social and cultural considerations regarding pole fitness, and pole fitness may provide a unique context in which to better understand the positive body image experiences of women who participate. Petersson McIntyre (2011) described how pole fitness was consistently reinforced by instructors as a healthy way to challenge conventional ideas of femininity and sexuality. Pellizzer, Tiggemann, and Clark (2016) recently examined how enjoyment of sexualization through the embodied activity of pole fitness contributes to positive body image as well. Although Pellizzer et al.'s (2016) findings provide critical insights into the construct of the enjoyment of sexualization and its relationship to positive body image, the quantitative nature of the study did not support a detailed exploration of the various features of pole fitness that may shape women's positive body image experiences.

Notwithstanding, Wood-Barcalow et al.'s (2010) grounded theory that produced an operational definition of positive body image, within the vast body image literature, relatively few researchers have used qualitative methodologies to explore positive body image. Although various qualitative study designs could support an in-depth understanding of positive body image, phenomenology provides a unique opportunity to more fully understand how positive body image is *experienced*. Phenomenological approaches have been employed to understand the body experiences of women, particularly in regard to fitness and exercise. For instance, Allen-Collinson (2011) argued that phenomenology can enable a researcher to better understand how a woman experiences body consciousness within the context of exercise and fitness. Similarly, Lökman (2011) employed a phenomenological framework to explore gender embodiment in females learning Aikido, a Japanese self-defense sport, and found that physical movement of a person is bound by context and culture. Specifically, women exist in a world or context that is laden with gendered expectations, and Lökman (2011) described how women became aware of their movements as a result of "lifelong learning and gendered socialization" (p. 273). The aforementioned studies demonstrate how phenomenological approaches can be used to better understand women's experiences of their bodies, specifically within the context of fitness.

An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used as the methodology for this study as it involves a comprehensive process for exploring how individuals make sense of significant life experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Unique from other phenomenological approaches, IPA acknowledges the central role of the analyst or researcher in interpreting or "making sense" of the participants' shared experiences. Within the body image literature, researchers have drawn upon IPA in their

exploration of complex phenomena, including the body perceptions of elite woman basketball players (Bennett, Scarlett, Hurd Clarke, & Crocker, 2017), changes in body image and social support experienced by breast cancer survivors that participated in dragon boat programs (McDonough, Sabiston, & Crocker, 2008), and the meaning of participating in a pro-anorexia Internet site (Mulveen & Hepworth, 2006). The purpose of this IPA was to describe and interpret the positive body image experiences of women actively involved in pole fitness.

Methods

IPA includes three main concepts: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Phenomenology is focused on individual accounts of lived experiences. Within this study, lived positive body image experiences were illuminated through interviews with women actively involved in pole fitness. In terms of hermeneutics, IPA is composed of a double hermeneutic process whereby the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant who is trying to make sense of his/her experience (Smith, 2004). In addition to interviews, observation was employed in this study to support a more in-depth understanding of the pole fitness context and how this context may shape the positive body image experiences of women. Such detailed understandings supported us as researchers when we sought to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their own body image experiences. A more detailed description of the interpretative or hermeneutic process is provided in the Data Analysis section. Finally, ideography refers to the process of engaging in single case in-depth analyses prior to producing any general statements. As outlined in the Data Analysis section, within this study, each woman's interview transcript was analyzed prior to developing any general statements regarding body image experiences. The ideographic nature of IPA supported the exploration of commonalities and discrepancies within, and then between, participants and provided rich data to interpret participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

Participants

A total of seven women between the ages of 20 and 36 years participated in this study. Participants were recruited in person from a local pole fitness studio in a western Canadian city. Criterion sampling, a type of purposeful sampling, was used to ensure that all participants met "some predetermined criterion of importance" to the study (Patton, 2002, p. 238). For this research, it was important that all participants were women who were, at the time of the study, enrolled as a student in a weekly pole fitness class. To support criterion sampling, the known sponsor approach was applied, whereby a person who has an existing, legitimate relationship with a specific group facilitates researcher access (Patton, 2002). In the case of this study, the known sponsor

direct quotes from participants and contextual information from observation were used to provide context for the interpretation of their experiences.

Various guidelines for evaluating the strength of an IPA study have been identified in the IPA literature (see Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009), and a number of these guidelines were applied within this study. For instance, IPA studies should have a clear focus and include a homogenous sample, which we have articulated in the previous sections. In addition, Smith et al. (2009) described how special awareness should be placed on the interview process, as effective interviews will result in strong data. Within this research, I had extensive training in conducting interviews, and two interviews were conducted for each participant. Sensitivity to context is also an important consideration (Yardley, 2008), and, therefore, within this study, observation was incorporated as an important process of data generation.

Results

The purpose of using IPA was to describe and interpret the positive body image experiences of women actively involved in pole fitness. The words and experiences of the participants are represented by five main themes: (a) observation and exposure fostering body acceptance, (b) performance promoting self-confidence, (c) personal growth and sexual expression, (d) unconditional community support creates comfort, and (e) body appreciation through physical skill development.

Observation and Exposure Fostering Body Acceptance

The studio in which participants engaged in pole fitness had floor-to-ceiling mirrors on three walls, and each class consisted of a small group of women working in close proximity on pole exercises, stretches, and strength exercises. Based on my own experience within this exercise environment, I argue that this context allows for women to observe not only their own bodies, but also the diversity of body shapes and sizes of others in their class. Olive described her first experience in pole fitness whereby she noticed, “All of the girls were a lot of different sizes. And it seemed like what you were learning about how to control your body had nothing to do with how you were made.” Lola indicated that the supportive environment of pole fitness, combined with the opportunity to participate in pole fitness alongside women of various shapes and sizes, played a significant role in learning to accept all parts of her body, stating:

The way I see myself now and how I saw myself then is like a total 180. Yeah, [pole fitness] just helped me love what I see in the mirror. Before, I was very critical of what I saw in the mirror. . . . And, if that makes sense, yeah, pole just helps you learn to be beautiful from the inside. And then it comes out, and then what you see in the mirrors,

you’re just . . . for me, it changed from “oh, I wish my hair was a little longer, I wish my nose was a little smaller, I wish, you know, my tummy was a little flatter.” It turned into “my hair looks great today, and I’ve got lovely teeth, and, yeah, my tummy isn’t the flattest, but it’s had three kids and I’m damn proud of that.” It just turned into, the negative wasn’t there, it was always positive.

Discussion of learning to accept their bodies was often framed around body size and certain features that are commonly portrayed in media as being attractive and desirable, such as a flat stomach and toned muscles. My interpretation of the participants’ shared experiences is that learning to accept their bodies involved coming to terms with not having certain features that the media portrays as attractive. This acceptance involved a process of refocusing, whereby the women placed their attention on other factors, not necessarily physical features that they deemed more important to their overall well-being. As Nikita explains, “I am far more forgiving when it comes down to ‘oh darn, I don’t quite have the washboard abs that I really want from the magazines.’” Athena expanded on this, alluding to the need to be happy with the way you are:

You wouldn’t want everyone to be the exact same, and I think a lot of it just comes with being happy with who you are and being content with the way you look. And whether that is being fit, and whether that is being lean, or whether that is just you being happy with the way you are, if that’s carrying 10 extra pounds, then, that’s what it is, right?

Anastasia shared how her involvement in pole fitness has caused her to reframe how she thinks and feels about the shape of her body stating, “I don’t worry so much about the shape, et cetera, of what I look like, it’s probably for a reason, because it helps me to get somewhere.” In addition to an overall acceptance of perceived flaws, participants also discussed how pole fitness has helped them become more comfortable with showing off the shape of their bodies. As Roxy reveals:

In the beginning, I was very nervous about my body. As I increased in the pole levels of my studio, I became much more comfortable in wearing smaller amounts of clothing. Now, I feel no shame in wearing a bra and booty shorts—even when meeting and teaching brand-new students, or around friends in my classes. Most women in all of my higher-level classes have different body types, but nobody is judgmental because we all have the same fitness ability and physical strength, whether you carry a bit of extra weight or not.

Participants described how the observation of and exposure to diverse bodies in pole fitness helped them to accept their bodies as they are, regardless of how their bodies may differ from conventional ideas of attractiveness and desirability. As such, I argue that

of pole fitness may have positive outcomes for women. Specifically, pole fitness may provide an environment in which women can actively challenge the taboos placed on female expressions of sexuality (Attwood, 2007) instead of the sexualization or objectification of women. Similar to research with belly dancers, it may be the case that sexiness for women in pole fitness is realized through the process of being “in” the dance, whereby women are able to appreciate their own sensuality rather than by acting in a way that conforms to externally imposed expectations or for the gaze of others (Moe, 2012; Tiggemann et al., 2014). Regehr (2012) has highlighted that although sexuality, particularly in regard to women, is complex, it is important to focus on ways to help ensure women have access to sexual agency, health, and exploration. Although it is crucial that researchers continue to address the impact of sexualization on women, it is equally critical to provide “space for sexual rights” (Lerum & Dworkin, 2009, p. 260). Consequently, spaces such as those provided by pole fitness or other forms of dance exercise, including recreational burlesque and belly dance, may provide spaces away from potential observers in which women can engage in sexual exploration for themselves (Moe, 2012; Regehr, 2012; Tiggemann et al., 2014).

Findings from this study also relate to existing research on self-esteem and contingencies of self-worth. Global self-esteem is an overall assessment of self-worth (Noser & Zeigler-Hill, 2014), and contingencies of self-worth represent a particular approach to self-esteem in which the focus is on understanding “what people believe they need to be or do to have value and worth as a person” (Crocker & Knight, 2005, p. 200). Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, and Bouvrette (2003) suggested that people are more likely to have higher levels of self-esteem when their self-worth is assessed based on core, unique features of the self or “relatively unconditional” external contingencies (p. 895), rather than on their appearance or external reinforcement. Participants in this study described how they learned through pole fitness to be confident in their bodies independent of other people’s approval, suggesting that they experienced development of noncontingent self-worth. Within the body image literature, this is a particularly notable finding, because those women who base their self-worth on appearance are more likely to experience body shame and engage in bodily surveillance (Noser & Zeigler-Hill, 2014). As recommended by Noser and Zeigler-Hill (2014), interventions should focus on altering the extent to which women’s feelings of self-worth are contingent upon appearance, and findings from this study suggest that pole fitness is one such context that may help to address this recommendation.

Despite the noted strengths of this study, it also has limitations. Participants in this research were from the same pole fitness studio, whereby classes were conducted as a mixture of strength development, “sexy” dance moves, and pole techniques. Holland (2010) highlighted that there is wide variety in terms of how fitness studios structure

classes. Therefore, findings from this research are limited to the more fitness structure of this specific pole fitness class, and future research should explore the positive body image experiences of women from a variety of pole fitness class structures. Four of the participants in this study were pole fitness instructors and they had an ongoing involvement in pole fitness as well. Their extensive backgrounds in pole fitness may have contributed to unique perspectives that likely vary from those of an average pole fitness student. Future research should include more pole fitness students at a variety of skill levels to explore the diverse positive body image experiences.

This research occurred during a short timeline and required participants to reflect back on their experiences. Therefore, future research should consider an ethnographic approach to provide a rich, thick description of how positive body image is experienced and potentially develops or evolves over time. Ethnographic approaches are sensitive to context and typically occur over an extended timeframe (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), and therefore, provide an ideal framework for understanding the complexities of positive body image. The study of body image within the pole fitness context is relatively novel and warrants more research attention as well. Given that positive body image and negative body image are distinct constructs that can be experienced at the same time (Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013), future research should consider exploring negative body image in an effort to contribute to a more in-depth understanding of the broad range of body image experiences within pole fitness and similar contexts.

In summary, this research has extended the positive body image literature in a number of ways. Specifically, the in-depth stories shared by women demonstrated that pole fitness is a context whereby positive body image can be experienced. This research provided unique insights into various constructs (e.g., body pride) that have informed contemporary understandings of positive body image as well. Finally, findings from this research highlighted important considerations for the development of programs to foster positive body image.

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