

Being at home in one's body

Body image in light of identity development

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Psykologiska institutionen, 2019

Avhandlingen för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i psykologi, som med vederbörligt tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakultetsstyrelsen vid Göteborgs universitet kommer att offentligen försvaras onsdagen den 5 juni 2019, klockan 10.00 i sal F1, Psykologiska institutionen, Haraldsgatan 1, Göteborg.

Fakultetsopponent: Professor Tracy Tylka, Department of Psychology, The Ohio State University, United States.

Föreliggande uppsats grundar sig på följande artiklar:

- I. Nelson, S. C., Kling, J., Wängqvist, M., Frisé, A., & Syed, M. (2018). Identity and the body: Trajectories of body esteem from adolescence to emerging adulthood. *Developmental Psychology*, *54*, 1159–1171. doi:10.1037/dev0000435
- II. Kling, J., Wängqvist, M., & Frisé, A. (2018). "This body is me": Discovering the ways in which the body is salient in people's identities. *Body Image*, *24*, 102–110. doi:10.1016/j.bodyim.2017.12.009
- III. Kling, J., Holmqvist Gattario, K., & Frisé, A. (2017). Swedish women's perceptions of and conformity to feminine norms. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, *58*, 238–248. doi:10.1111/sjop.12361



Abstract

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Although the importance of the body to people's identities has long been theoretically inferred, research linking body image and identity development is scarce. The objective of this thesis was to address this research gap by exploring body image from an identity perspective. **Study I** aimed to examine how trajectories of body image development from early adolescence to emerging adulthood are related to young people's sense of identity. A community sample participated from the age of 10 years ($N = 967$, 53% females) to the age of 24 ($N = 542$, 56% females). Results of Study I indicated that body image development is connected to sense of identity in emerging adulthood, such that individuals in trajectories with more negative body image displayed less identity coherence. Results also indicated that girls and women (particularly those with higher body mass index) are more likely to display disadvantageous development in terms of more negative body image and more identity problems. The aim of **Study II** was to explore the many ways in which people might experience their bodies as salient to their identities. Young adults ($N = 121$, 51% women; community sample) were interviewed, and a thematic analysis of the interviews identified four main themes: (1) *identification with the body*, (2) *body functionality in performing identity-relevant tasks*, (3) *appearance and identity in social interactions*, and (4) *identity-relevant bodily engagement*. Both positive and negative ways in which the body is salient to identity were described within all four themes, and descriptions highlighted functionality, embodied experiences, and social environments. Gender differences were generally not found, with one exception: more women than men described experiences of identifying with their bodies. **Study III** was performed in two parts with the aim of exploring the sociocultural context in which both body image and identity are formed. This was done by investigating young Swedish women's perceptions of and conformity to feminine norms. In Part 1, a community sample of 317 young women participated in a cross-national comparison, showing that Swedish women generally display less gender role norm conformity than do their counterparts in Canada, the USA, and Slovakia. In Part 2, a focus group study conveyed a more nuanced picture of feminine norms, by showing that even though traditional gender roles might be less pronounced in Sweden, gender role conformity is still a pressing issue. Specifically, appearance norms were considered the most important feminine norms to conform to. In conclusion, the thesis supports theoretical notions of a connection between body image and identity. It also shows that this connection can be experienced in both positive and negative ways and that more women than men experience both negative body image and identification with their bodies, highlighting the importance of the sociocultural context. Furthermore, the thesis opens up the possibility of a new theoretical approach by including and discussing body image as part of developmental psychology in general and identity theory in particular. In this way, the thesis not only offers innovative results about the connection between body image and identity development, but is also of theoretical importance.

Keywords: body image; identity development; longitudinal development; emerging adulthood; young adulthood; gender role norms

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