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Embodied Minds: College Women’s Experience and the Panopticon of Higher Education

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This article explores the ways in which women’s perceptions of their own bodies affect their experiences as students in higher education. Based on online focus group interviews with 25 college women, the authors use Foucault’s concept of the “Panopticon” to consider how students internalize and enforce gendered expectations related to ideal body types within college contexts. Centered in the belief that college is a time when people develop their identities, this study investigates how women students’ experiences in college are influenced by their embodied minds. We demonstrate how their feelings of being critically observed and judged influenced decisions related to their academic and social interactions as well as their academic success and feelings of belonging. The article concludes by urging educators and scholars to pay attention to the ways in which minds and bodies influence teaching and learning interactions.

Women college students experience their bodies as part of their educational experiences in complex ways. Previous research has found that as many as 80% of women college students are dissatisfied with their bodies and think regularly about how close or far their bodies are from a “thin ideal” (Choate, 2003; Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2012; Neighbors & Sobal, 2007). Women college students frequently report feeling watched and monitored by others (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2012) and making decisions either to enter the field of others’ gaze or avoid it if possible (McKinley, 1998; Moradi & Huang, 2008). In other words, college women spend significant amounts of time and energy thinking about how to construct their bodies. Furthermore, college women also work to negotiate a gaze that is both normalized (in that there is the perception that everyone experiences it) and normalizing (in that students feel pressured to conform to what they perceive as others’ expectations of “normal” bodies).

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This article engages with feminist theory and the emergent field of critical fat studies (Ferrell, 2011; Gard & Wright, 2005; Rothblum & Soloway, 2009) to focus on the social constructions of obesity, health, fat, and gender in relation to body image of college women. This article does not focus on the bio-medical features of the health of women’s bodies. Instead, we consider how societies construct the meanings of women’s bodies in ways that allow for either normalcy or deviancy (Braziel & LeBesco, 2001). In the United States, public media foregrounds both health and beauty to establish the ideal for women’s body types, and most women who enter college have been well-socialized to compare their bodies to that ideal (Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Engeln-Maddox, 2005). Yet, research on the social construction of bodies suggests that in addition to bio-medical measures, how a body comes to be understood as “healthy” is also closely linked to and mediated by one’s culture, family of origin, and peers (Ferrell, 2011; Gard & Wright, 2005). In other words, there are multiple ways to engage—or disengage—from the ideal construct of what constitutes a “normal” or “deviant” woman’s body.

Higher education is a particularly important context in which to explore women’s experiences with idealized constructs of the body, given the role of colleges and universities in facilitating students’ personal and professional development. Specifically, college is a time when students develop identities and explore how to author their own lives and make meaning of their ideas and experiences (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000). As Baxter Magolda and King (2007) wrote:

Self-authored persons have the ability to explore, reflect on, and internally choose enduring values to form their identities rather than doing so by simply assimilating expectations of external others (Kegan, 1994). They then use this internal identity to interpret and guide their experiences and actions. This internal identity that is not overly dependent on others is a crucial aspect of standing up for one’s own beliefs (an aspect of cognitive maturity). Similarly, it is a crucial aspect of mature relationships (the interpersonal dimension) that require respect for both self and other. (p. 492)

While people of all gender identities and expressions receive messages about idealized body constructs, there is evidence that college women struggle to develop an identity related to their bodies that allows for a rejection of the expectations of external forces. Grounded in research suggesting that women who are obese or overweight are less likely to attend college (Glass, Haas, & Reither, 2010) and that college women of all body types spend time managing their bodies (Choate, 2003; Fitzsimmons et. al, 2012), this study investigates how women students’ experiences in college are influenced by their embodied minds.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF WOMEN’S BODIES

Standards of beauty, health, and body size norms are culturally constructed and highly correlated with a culture’s gender roles. Time, social location, and cultural expectations each influence what is known as beauty or what constitutes a body type (Bordo, 2003). For example, in U.S. dating and popular culture, beauty ideals for women include light skin, fine hair, and toned bodies (Glasser, Robnett, & Feliciano, 2009). In other contexts, cultures, and eras, a woman’s beauty has been highly related to her fertility: full bodies, broad hips, and large breasts (Ferrell, 2011).
Starting at an early age, American women spend a significant amount of time thinking about their bodies and developing habits that influence how they perceive their bodies. Previous studies have found that girls experience years of intense scrutiny of their bodies in K–12 education and internalize messages about their physical attractiveness and “appropriate” actions related to eating (Moffat, 2010; Rice, 2007; Rich, 2011). These messages rely on a coordinated system of language and images that are the basis from which people construct their lives (Bordo, 2003). These discourses are supported by a belief held by many in the United States that the labeling of bodies as “normal” or “deviant” is supported by science and medical research and not by culturally constructed ideals (Gard & Wright, 2005). Especially in Western societies, diet, nutrition, and exercise are common topics of conversation, research, and concern (Moffat, 2010; Oliver & Lee, 2005; Tillotson, 2004). Engeln-Maddox (2005) argued that these discussions often differ based on gender norms, placing specific expectations on women to look and be a certain way in order to be viewed as fit, healthy, and attractive. These norms have the potential to be particularly influential in the college environment, where students are actively developing many facets of their identities, including key understandings about their bodies (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000).

EXPERIENCING THE PANOPTICON IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education contexts are certainly not immune to the influences of popular culture, social expectations of beauty and “normal” bodies, or the pressures associated with striving to achieve the “ideal” body. The women in our research emphasized in many ways how they felt their bodies were being monitored by ubiquitous, yet unnamed, forces. Oftentimes, participants also articulated that they were watching others’ bodies in a way that assessed the quality and value of those bodies.

As we engaged with the stories we heard from college women in this study, we came to see the similarities between their stories and Foucault’s (1979) elaboration on the Panopticon. Calling to mind the watchtower used to monitor prisoners, the concept of the Panopticon can be used to symbolize how people internalize others’ monitoring of them such that they shape their behaviors even if monitoring is not happening at that moment. To elaborate, Foucault writes:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action …; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. … The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen. (Foucault, 1979, p. 201–202)

In our research, we found that women college students often felt monitored in classes, with friends and faculty, in recreational settings, and at social and extracurricular events. Often, participants described being monitored by ambiguous “others,” even if there was no evidence of anyone watching or judging them. They internalized norms about what it meant to have an idealized body and shaped their behavior to minimize the risks or maximize the benefits of...
others’ evaluations of their bodies. They began to monitor themselves to conform to (or resist) the ubiquitous gaze that they expected might always be upon their bodies. In this way, most of the college women in our study experienced their bodies as inextricably connected to their minds. With few exceptions, they believed that others’ judgments of their intellectual and other contributions in college settings were linked to others’ judgments of their bodies. They experienced educational settings as “embodied minds” or “minded bodies.”

The emergent code of the Panopticon came from our analysis of the data; it was not predetermined when we began our interviews. Instead, once we realized the extent to which most of our participants’ engaged in monitoring of themselves and others, we developed three analytic questions to focus more deliberately on this point. First, what are the external pressures that influence how college women make sense of their bodies? In other words, what do college women perceive as panoptical forces, forces that are ubiquitous but have no identifiable enforcers? Second, how do college women experience the pressures to see and be seen? How do women perceive themselves as involved in monitoring both their own bodies as well as others’ bodies, as both the subject and object of panoptical forces? Third, how do college women respond in thought and action to their perceptions of monitoring?

METHODS

Our study is informed by feminist approaches to research. As Ropers-Huilman and Winters (2011) observed, feminist researchers often use the same tools as other researchers, but they also focus explicitly on the power relations associated with the processes that lead to knowledge construction (p. 271). In this study, we sought to maximize the ability of our participants to author their own stories while also hearing the stories of other students. Specifically, we approached the study using a critical interpretivist lens, in which we both valued participants’ interpretations of their own experiences while also recognizing that those interpretations are within a context in which power relations shape experiences and understandings. Aligned with our critical interpretivist and feminist approach, we used qualitative online text-based focus groups to solicit participants’ views (Krueger & Casey, 2009). This approach allowed participants to engage with each other in a forum in which their bodies were not visible to others in the group or to us as interviewers.

Krueger and Casey (2009) argued that developing trust and rapport is tantamount to gaining useful and reliable feedback in online or in-person focus group discussions. These authors argue that it may be difficult to develop this type of rapport if the topic is sensitive, dangerous, or viewed as a threat to participants. As researchers, we recognized the sensitivity and potential risk of talking about experiences related to one’s body, particularly when revealing these experiences to an unfamiliar group. Since the goal of our study was to consider how college women think about physical appearance, abilities, and fitness in relation to their educational experiences, it was critical for us to provide as safe and secure an environment as possible for our participants. Krueger and Casey (2009) suggested that compared with an in-person focus group option, the online focus group method can help moderators build trust more quickly, create a greater sense of anonymity, and provide a more secure medium for discussing sensitive topics. Accordingly, we decided that an online forum, secured and maintained by the university system, was the most appropriate option for this study.
Four online focus groups were conducted with a total of 25 women undergraduate students at a major research university in the Midwest. Each group consisted of five to ten participants. In order to recruit women college students from diverse backgrounds, we worked with instructors who taught 1000-level literature and writing courses with no prerequisites that enrolled students from across the university. All students who had recently or were currently enrolled in these 1000-level courses were sent an invitational e-mail from us describing the study procedures and research questions. In order to ensure a racially and ethnically diverse sample, we contacted the leaders of identity-based, on-campus student organizations, clubs, and activities. Those leaders agreed to send our invitation to their membership listservs, which included both men and women. The e-mail solicited participants who identified as women. We did not, at any point, meet with the participants face-to-face to assess how the gender identity of “woman” was performed by the students. Twenty-five students self-selected to participate in the study by responding to the researchers via e-mail.

The focus group protocol emphasized how students felt about their bodies in educational experiences, in experiences where they felt either judged or powerful, and in educational experiences where intelligence was valued. We also asked how their body image has changed over time, and how they believed their body image was influenced by their culture or gender.

One of the benefits of using online focus groups as a research method was that it occurred over the span of several days, providing more time to enhance trust in the group and encouraging reflection by way of giving time for participants to engage with the comments and questions at their own pace (Krueger & Casey, 2009). In this study, the focus groups transpired over a five-day period and were each moderated by one of the researchers. The moderators used a set of highly structured questions as the focus group protocol for the week. The focus groups began with a written introduction posted by the moderator and the request for participants to complete a demographic and open-ended questionnaire on the first day. Each day followed with the moderator posting two to three new questions by 8 a.m. Participants were asked to post their comments by 11 p.m. each night and to respond to postings of other participants and the moderator. The majority of students fulfilled this level of participation throughout the week.

Krueger and Casey (2009) asserted that in an online focus group discussion, the moderator’s role is to guide and encourage participants to comment and pose questions to other participants throughout the day that center on the subject of the discussion. The moderators found that through guided discussion and probing questioning during the first two days of the focus groups, participants subsequently engaged with each other without the need for substantial direction from the moderator. The moderators also discovered that as participants reflected on more sensitive thoughts and experiences, others participants responded with encouraging remarks, uplifting advice, and a clear sense of empathy, which created an even stronger sense of rapport in the group. Following completion of the focus group discussions, participants were given a small token of appreciation for their participation.

Transcript-based analysis was performed by coding all online typed responses for emergent themes. We drew from Krueger’s (2002) systemic analytic process designed for focus group interview data. In this process, Krueger maintains that context, frequency and extensiveness of comments, intensity of expression, and specificity of responses are key to coding and locating emergent themes. Once we identified notable quotes, preliminary codes, and key themes, our three-person research team discussed the data until we believed that each code characterized participants’ perspectives. These codes focused on participants’ interpretations of how external
forces affected their body image, how participants felt their bodies were watched and how they participated in watching others’ bodies in a variety of settings, and how participants shaped their thoughts and behaviors in relation to their perceptions of others watching their bodies. While we began this study hoping to learn about how college women students engaged with the concept of “the ideal body,” we were surprised to learn about how much monitoring of themselves and others occurred in their college experiences. As stated earlier, this code was developed by our close reading of the participants’ embodied experiences in higher education, and led us to investigate the ways in which Foucault’s metaphor of the Panopticon might be useful to our understanding of students’ experiences.

**Participant Demographics and Background Characteristics**

During the first phase of our focus groups, participants completed an online questionnaire that gathered demographic information and their initial perspectives on the relationship between higher education and embodied learning experiences. The 25 students in the study answered 12 open- and closed-ended questions so that we could learn more about them as participants. The participants did not see each others’ answers for this portion of the focus groups. The students ranged between 19–24 years of age, and the majority (21) had completed 61 or more college credits, meaning that they were at junior or senior enrollment status. Students were enrolled in a wide variety of majors in seven different colleges within the university.

The questionnaire gave students space to answer a number of questions about their social background, individual and group identities. Students in the study identified as White (16), Asian American (3), African American (2), and Latina/Chicana/Hispanic (1). Three students identified as international students and listed Chinese (1), Korean (1), and Somali (1) as ethnic/national group identities. One student identified as bisexual, and the remaining 24 students as heterosexual. No student identified as being disabled. We asked if students qualified for Pell Grant Funding since we believed that this question would allow us to make connections between the participants’ and federal financial aid formula definitions of “low-income.” Nine students responded that they received Pell Grant Funding, 11 that they did not, and 5 were unsure.

One of the questions asked students to describe the size of their bodies in familiar terms: “underweight,” “normal weight,” “overweight,” and “significantly overweight.” At no point did we ask students to share with us medical information such as their height, weight, or body mass index (BMI). The purpose of our study was to understand how students think about their own bodies; therefore, we were interested in what these body size categories meant to our participants. Sixteen students identified as “normal weight”; 7 as “overweight”; 1 as “underweight”; and 1 as “significantly overweight.”

Our intent in providing this demographic information is to contextualize the findings and clarify who is and is not present in our research. It is not our intent to compare responses across demographic groups. Given the exploratory nature of this research, we focused instead on seeking themes that existed in the diverse data set and making suggestions for future research based on the themes that we found. Our study design presumed an intersectional approach to these myriad categories, and we asked follow up questions that allowed students to think about how gender related to other social identities and culture for them. With the belief that gender continues to matter as a category of identity, we sought to understand how power works to regulate women’s bodies within the higher education environment. Numerous students spoke
about how other social group identities related to their understanding of their bodies, and we 
note some of those responses in this article. Future research should focus more explicitly on the 
intersections of race, class, and gender, since numerous students addressed the importance of 
these identities.

PANOPTICAL PRESSURES

In her article, “The Empire of Images in our World of Bodies,” Susan Bordo (2003) described 
her experience with cultural messages of beauty for Western woman as “constant, everywhere, 
no big deal. Like water in a goldfish bowl, barely noticed by its inhabitants” (p. B6). Similar to 
the ubiquity of the watch tower in Foucault’s (1979) conception of the Panopticon, Bordo 
characterized women’s focus on their bodies as being normalized and internalized. In this 
section, we focus on the pressures students believed affected their thinking and behavior related 
to their bodies. Participants expressed an overwhelming belief that they were barraged with 
language and images telling them that they were supposed to be “thin but still have curves”, 
“slender”, “skinny and tall” and “wear makeup, dress nicely, and exercise in order to attract 
men’s attention.” They reported that they experienced this from the media, friends, others on 
campus, and their larger cultures. 

Repeatedly, participants in the focus groups discussed the “pressure” they felt from cultural 
institutions such as media and from their peers in college to shape their bodies into an ideal of 
beauty that, to many participants, was “unattainable.” As one participant stated:

In modern American culture, value is placed on slim women over bigger women. Since my body 
doesn’t fit the ideal, I feel I have to change it in order to be considered attractive. I realize that most 
women don’t fit the ideal, but I still have the desire to meet cultural expectations.

Several participants expressed how they experienced the media’s unrealistic representation of 
women and standards of beauty. Specifically, they articulated how and why media images had 
been negative in their lives, and simultaneously that they felt powerless to resist those images. 
For example, one participant wrote:

I think being in America really messes with the way any woman views her body, especially if she is 
at all in touch with the media. I personally have felt very pressured by ads, diet plans in magazines, 
and more over my years. I am also very into Asian cultures, which in some ways is more of “my 
culture” than American culture, and I think that somehow messes with my view of my body as well. 
Because I have some kind of double standard for myself that I can’t live up to and it ends up 
upsetting me.

The cultural conditioning communicated to women through media clearly influenced the way 
participants viewed their bodies and constructed their perceptions of the ideal body image. The 
messages about beauty and body weight led participants to engage in a constant battle to eat 
right, dress right, and look attractive in order to fit into both their peers’ understanding and the 
media’s portrayal of the “ideal” woman.

A few participants believed that the influences of media and cultural norms ultimately had 
positive effects in their lives. For example, one wrote that because she has been “shown many 
pictures of beautiful thin women. … I always strive to be healthy and fit.” Another relied on her
religion to guide her belief that since she believed God created her body, she should see herself and others as beautiful regardless of the extent to which they conform to popular images of beauty. Finally, a third participant wrote that she simply saw the norm for beautiful woman as unattainable and, because of her aspirations as a student-athlete, undesirable. As such, she stated, “with the gender influences set to a standard that I can’t achieve, I like my body because I do not fall into the gender norms.” In her rejection of and resistance to established norms of body size and beauty, she often had a positive body image, focusing on what her body could do rather than its appearance.

Another theme from our findings was offered by students who identified as coming from or identifying with a culture outside the dominant United States culture. A few participants noted how the cultural context in which they lived or with which they identified affected their body image. For example, two participants conveyed that they appreciated the range of body types that they saw around them in the United States:

I am a Chinese girl. I have to admit that Chinese girls are generally smaller than U.S. girls. So I look normal here, but a little strong in China. … But after being in U.S., I do care more about the fitness of body, which means having slightly beautiful muscles, [rather] than only looking slim and weak.

Another student who identified with a culture outside the United States wrote:

My culture plays a huge role in why I am not as confident about my body image. Because in my culture you are supposed to be skinny and I am obviously not skinny. The way people are taught about how they should look like and how they should act is all how a skinny person should be.

Other students wrote about how they negotiated two cultures in constructing their body images. One wrote:

I think one thing that has allowed me to love my body and my body shape is the influence of culture. I am a Somali woman, and in my culture, especially the African culture, we love women with curves. We appreciate the beauty. In fact, it’s funny to mention this to my non-African friends, but in Africa, weight signifies wealth. … If you are heavier, it means that you can afford your diet.

Overwhelmingly, participants in our study pointed to the media in their cultures as a factor in presenting the ideal of women’s beauty. They also noted the influence of both U.S. culture and other cultures as being influential on their body image. Participants identified many pressures external to the higher education environment that shaped their self-perceptions. Students discussed how they internalized those pressures in ways that were at times challenging and painful. We learned from our participants that these pressures affected their identity development and sense of self-worth. The next section of the article focuses more specifically on higher education environments to explore how cultural norms are expressed in the everyday interaction in a higher education context. This section also further unpacks the implications of identity as students experience the panoptical gaze.

PANOPTICAL PRESSURES TO SEE AND BE SEEN IN COLLEGE

College women in our study expressed that they felt their bodies were watched and judged in myriad ways. Additionally, they noted that they participated in watching others and comparing
themselves to other women regularly. They participated as monitors in the reinforcement of the
cultural norms and expectations related to body norms. Our primary focus in this section centers
on the following question: How do women perceive themselves as involved in monitoring their
own bodies as well as others’ bodies, as both the “watcher” and “watched”?

Feeling Observed

Many participants felt monitored, observed, and judged through their interactions in class. Some
students made general comments about how their perceptions of being watched influenced their
participation in class. For example, one participant wrote:

I don’t like the spotlight on me and [if I participate actively in class], it adds attention and then
people will be more likely to look at me and judge me for my physical appearance instead of what
I’m sharing with the class.

Another shared that:

I often feel judged in class when I raise my hand to answer (but more so when I ask) a question. The
feeling grows exponentially if I get the answer wrong. In these moments I usually feel hyper-aware
of my body and how it’s being viewed. Do I look too casual? Or fat? Are my pants too short? I feel
judged because all eyes are on me.

Several participants told us that they felt that their bodies influenced their abilities to give
presentations in class. For example, one student reported that:

Almost every time I answer a question or present in front of a group, I am aware of myself and
worried about being judged. [In one situation,] when it came my turn [to introduce myself] I was so
nervous! I am sure my face turned bright red as I was telling myself how dumb and ugly people
probably thought I was.

If students were uncomfortable or not confident about their knowledge or skills in an area,
their body image became a source of even greater concern. In one case, a student whose first
language was not English wrote:

[In presentations,] I was not only nervous about my English but also my body image. I thought, “If
my English is not good enough, I should look better in my body image but I am overweight.” I knew
that people do not really judge me, but I was being so conscious about my body image and that made
me think that people were judging me.

Another expressed that earlier in her college experience, she felt she would have been judged if
she presented with someone who more closely approximated idealized standards of beauty in
United States culture. She wrote that, “[If] I am presenting with girls ‘tinier’ than me, then
perhaps I would feel as if the class is automatically making comparisons.” These students’
comments, taken as a whole, suggest that participants experienced not only a neutral observation
but also a panoptical gaze that both observed and judged the merits of their bodies while they
were engaged in academic processes.

While we anticipated that presentations might have prompted students to be more aware of
their bodies, we were surprised that group work also heightened students’ body consciousness.
Several students commented on experiences about how people’s perceptions of each other’s
bodies affected who was considered desirable or undesirable as a group member. For example, one told us, “I have had a lot of classes in which we worked together in groups a lot. When groups were formed for the first time, a lot of snap judgments and first impressions were made based on physical appearance.” Another noticed this phenomenon in her peers’ actions and internalized it when being asked to form groups in academic settings. She wrote:

When working in group projects, body image is always something that I tend to focus on too much—especially right at the beginning. I want the other group members to believe that I am a hard worker, but does my body portray that? I’m always very self-conscious about the way I look.

In group projects, especially when students did not yet have the chance to get to know about each other’s intellectual skills, students judged others’ potential contributions based on how they perceived their bodies. Additionally, they tried to construct their own bodies so that they were seen as desirable group members. Norms about idealized bodies were both internalized and expressed in many higher education contexts.

Feeling Powerful

Many participants wrote about the connection between how they felt about their bodies and their learning. In essence, they told us, when they felt powerful and positive about their bodies regardless of the context, they felt productive and comfortable. When they felt negative about their bodies, their learning was impeded and they felt uncomfortable. In other words, when their bodily performances approximated what they understood to be the norm, they felt positive about the learning and empowered to participate more fully in educational experiences.

Some students told us that success or feeling empowered sometimes allowed them to temporarily forget their bodily “flaws.” For example, one student told us:

Feeling powerful or empowered is such a positive feeling; it’s hard to think of negatives when you’re on that high. I don’t [think] there has been a time when I have aced an exam or gave a flawless speech that I thought, “Can the audience see the pimple on my forehead or the roll over the waistline of my pants or my unshaven legs?”

One student described that when she was leading an event, she “felt very comfortable in my body due to the comfy jeans and flow[ing] top I wore. I felt good, and to feel good I dressed in a very flattering outfit. I knew I looked great and that helped me get through the stressful and long day.” Her belief in how her body would be judged by others, though not by anyone in particular, made her more confident in her leadership role.

Feeling Judged

For women who did not believe their bodies—and hence their selves—would be judged positively, the gaze of others was something that caused disengagement and discomfort. One student wrote, “[In] everyday life I can feel people staring at me because of how I dress and how I look physically. Around school I can feel stares because of my size.” Another told us that:

I usually feel judged every day when I am walking around campus. Because I am bigger I feel that people assume that I am lazy, eat too much, and don’t do anything with my life. In my body, I feel insecure. And I don’t want this body.
Yet another told us that:

Quite honestly I always feel judged. Even at work where I feel powerful among my co-workers I feel judged by the customers. I feel judged walking to/from class, work, basically walking anywhere on campus. I see what seems like everyone in workout clothes and I feel like I have a flashing neon sign saying “Look at me! Judge me!” As sad as it is to admit, I barely make eye contact with people when I’m walking because I’m afraid that they will think I’m staring at them and be disgusted by that fact.

For students who did not identify with the dominant identities in a social group, the feeling of others’ attention on their bodies intensified. For example:

There are many more instances in college where I have felt judged than I think I ever have in my life before. Although I said my organization made me feel powerful, I always feel like people outside of the organization are judging me because I’m not the specific race/ethnicity that is common in the group. … So I kind of feel like hiding away my body during these experiences because that is all I want to do in defense.

Because this student was not “like everyone else” in terms of race and ethnicity, she felt the need to hide her body as a defense against others’ judgment.

In sum, women students’ intellectual work and educational experiences were linked to their physical being. Participants consistently conveyed to us that feeling observed, powerful, and judged were facets of their embodied experiences in college. In the next section, we focus on strategies used to deal with the panoptical forces, including avoidance of campus activities where participants felt negatively evaluated and engagement in experiences in which they felt that their bodies would be empowered or valued.

RESPONSES TO PANOPTICAL FORCES

What are the effects of students’ interpretations and internalizations of the external forces that serve to judge and monitor women as embodied learners? How do they change their behaviors to respond to the perceived Panopticon? In this section, we discuss how college women in our study internalized their beliefs that someone might always be watching them and judging how they fit the expectations of the ubiquitous watchers.

Constant Comparisons and Continuous Improvements

Many participants were troubled by their perception that others were watching them and judging the worth of their bodies in academic and co-curricular contexts; yet, they also noted that they often participated in watching and judging others as well. We heard many different versions of this process of constant comparison, so much so that it seemed to be normalized among our participants, even as they recognized its deleterious effects. One student wrote, “I often compare myself to others, which usually ends up making me feel worse.” Another told us, “I feel that as a woman, there are more expectations from society and men that we must look and act in a certain or acceptable manner. … Also, like other females, I tend to compare myself to other girls on my appearance.” In one example, a student described an all-women club in which she participated.
and noted, “All these girls dress and look really nice, so I have felt pressure to fit in and spend more time on how I look.”

According to our findings, “measuring up” in the eyes of one’s peers took both emotional energy and time. The regularity with which students articulated their constant comparisons suggests that many women college students spend a good deal of time comparing themselves to those around them and try to be rated favorably by those who judge them. In a comment that summed up many students’ sentiments, one student told us, “When I compare myself to other girls who put so much effort into their appearance, I feel like I should put more effort, too, but it seems like so much work.”

Even though many of our participants acknowledged that most women simply could not achieve popular culture’s idealized body, many of them reported that they still made conscious decisions and took action to engage in the “continuous improvement” of their bodies. Participants employed a variety of strategies to address the sense of being judged by others. For example, some students began to exercise and eat more healthfully in an attempt to better approximate the perceived ideal. In many cases, it was clear that the primary intention was not improved health but rather a body that received better judgments from oneself and others. Additionally, while described as empowering, working out was double-edged for some students as well. As one student told us, “[Participating in a sport] led to some problems because of how much muscle I was gaining. Though huge arms and thighs were helpful for succeeding in [my sport], I felt less feminine and attractive.” Participants tried to control others’ gaze through monitoring their own bodies, but because the idealized body is impossible for many to achieve, choices about how to do this were both uncertain and time-consuming.

**Changing Daily Routines to Avoid Being Seen**

Some of our participants made decisions both about which classes to take and about how to engage in those classes based on their body images. One indicated that she was uncomfortable taking classes with men or leaving her dorm room because, “I just don’t like my fat body; I thought everybody looked at me. I didn’t want to go [to the] library. [I] prefer to study at the dorm even though [the] library is a more perfect place to study.” She continued, “after I lose weight, I think I can concentrate in lecture (because I don’t have to think about my body shape during lecture).”

A few students told us that they avoided talking with new people and instead tried to enroll in classes with people they already knew. Many students wrote about their hesitancy to raise their hands, share their opinions, or stand in front of the class for an activity. One participant expressed that she was reluctant to participate in extracurricular activities because of her body image, as she noted that it was “mainly because I am self-conscious about how I would look doing these activities.” Another hesitated to participate in class and instead sat in the back of the class so as not to attract attention to herself. Others wrote of bodily responses, such as having their heart rate spike or blushing when they spoke in class. In order to compensate for these bodily responses, they tried to avoid participating in class as much as possible.

One participant wrote about going out for dinner with her friends and ordering something different than they did. At that time, though she did not indicate that anyone said anything about her order, she felt that she was being monitored for her meal choice. As she wrote:
One experience at feeling judged was when out to dinner and three of my friends ordered salads and I ordered a pizza. I could tell they all kind of looked surprised and judging me as if I was going to get EXTREMELY fat from eating this one pizza. At this point in time I felt very self-conscious about my body and wanted to get out of the dinner ASAP. I was no longer comfortable and wanted this awkwardness to end immediately. I remember waking up the next morning feeling as if I must go to the gym to rid myself of that memory and [the] guilt my friends created.

In what she wrote, she described both awkwardness and guilt based on what she perceived to be the judgments of her friends. These feelings led to her changing her behaviors in order to change her body and protect herself from a negative judgment.

Several students problematized the time that they and other women spent on constructing their bodies. One told us, “Since high school, the type/style of clothing that I wear has changed gradually, the time that I take to get ready in the morning has doubled, and I have been more concerned about working out and staying in shape.” Yet, if they did not spend the time to construct themselves in a way they thought would be positively judged, their interactions with others were impeded. For example, a participant explained that she felt judged by others and judged herself if she did not wear makeup, “I think I look unattractive without makeup in public and I think others have the same opinion of me. When I feel judged I feel embarrassed and withdrawn. I look down at the ground and avoid eye contact.”

In addition to making external behavioral changes in response to their embodied minds being monitored and judged, students wrote about the internalized struggles they experienced in reaction to the ever-present panoptical forces. None of our participants expressed surprise or a lack of understanding in response to the many comments offered by other participants about normalizing factors that had effects on their abilities to be fully engaged participants in college. Many were clearly still struggling. This was evident in comments like, “I think if I were more fit, I would be more confident and more willing to put myself out there. I think I would stop feeling so self-conscious and I would be more willing to speak up in class. I would feel more comfortable in my own skin” or “In college, I’m always aware of my appearance. My feelings have become more negative over time because of how I am always focused on my body/appearance.”

However, several other participants seemed to demonstrate a resignation to the tensions associated with their continuous improvement toward an unattainable ideal. They also expressed a sense that they were making peace with that tension. For example, one participant wrote, “I’m still not 100% in love with the way my body looks, but I’m 100% appreciative of what it does for me. I’m lucky to be as healthy and happy as I am.” And another indicated that, “Over time I have come to grow and accept the fact that my body is my body. … I still have at least one low point every month where I just get depressed about my body, but overall I would say my image of my body is slowly growing more towards acceptance.” Regardless of where our participants were in their struggle, they had thought deeply about the importance of “minding their bodies.” While the precise ways in which that occurred were informed by cultures, friends, and perceptions of others’ judgments, they nonetheless spent a great deal of time thinking about, responding to and disciplining ideas about their bodies.
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings from this study suggest that women students engaged in careful performances to manage the effects of their bodies in public spaces. Women’s bodies are a critical component of women’s lives, including their educational experiences. Thus, to ignore this aspect is to ignore a key element of the lived experience of women. In this discussion, we urge educators and scholars to pay attention to the ways in which minds and bodies influence teaching and learning interactions.

Images and expectations of beauty influence the narratives that women construct, maintain, and strive for regarding their bodies and body images. Our findings indicated that participants mediated messages, images, and language about weight, beauty, fitness, and health on a daily basis. Whether with friends, in class, with a faculty member, doing group work, or simply walking across campus, participants internalized cultural expectations and norms about ideal beauty, weight, and body image into their own their understandings of how their bodies should appear. The discourses related to an idealized body not only shaped how students viewed their own bodies but also affected the decisions they made in their educational experiences in college.

Interestingly, while some participants wrote about the ways in which they felt socialized to construct bodies that were appealing to men, they wrote far more often about the comparisons made between and among women. In fact, they rarely wrote about actual encounters with men or about times when they specifically felt judged by men. Instead, they focused on women as the primary monitors of women. As one participant wrote about her development in relation to body image, “It has taken me a long time to feel comfortable in my skin and not worry too much about what others, primarily women, think of me.” From our research, we learned that women’s internalization and enforcement of cultural norms with each other played a significant role in promoting minded bodies. Additionally, since size is valued differently within different cultures and contexts, viewing one’s body as “normal sized” in one culture is not insurance against internalized pressure to meet an idealization of women’s bodies in another culture. Our participants experienced the gaze of the Panopticon regardless of their bodily self-perceptions, as they felt it was reinforced ubiquitously throughout their educational experiences.

This research indicates that individual women students’ perceptions of their bodies influence how they experience their daily lives. While for some women, this ongoing and focused attention on their bodies results in disordered eating (Choate, 2003), it can also deeply affect how they experience the educational and social environments present in higher education contexts. Students mind their bodies to both anticipate and respond to the ubiquitous gaze found in interactions and in the broader culture. They embody their minds, such that their learning is influenced by how they think their bodies are perceived in a given context. Knowing that college women’s understandings of their bodies impact educational experiences has significant implications for how educators teach, scholars conduct research, and administrators develop policies related to college students’ experiences. Acknowledging how discourses and culture shape understandings of the mind and body connection in educational environments can lead to more holistic experiences for students as they navigate the complex ecology of college life. In the following, we note several strategies that scholars and educators can use in order to trouble and challenge the normal ways that we address, or fail to address, embodied minds. Through critical inquiry and reflection, it is possible to get in touch with how bodies matter in education.
Our participants struggled with the idea of being, becoming, and embodying an idealized normal. As many of our participants recognized, “normal” was a problematic concept because it was socially and culturally constructed and dependent upon context. Yet, when asked to describe their own bodies as a facet of the initial questionnaire, our participants chose language that placed their bodies into a “normal/abnormal” binary. They had a belief about what was “normal” or “beautiful” in relation to the sociocultural forces that were both internalized and reinforced by the panoptical gaze.

The sense of embodied self is clearly an important aspect of identity, yet it is rarely researched in higher education scholarship. We recommend that higher education scholars and practitioners expand, seek, and validate this line of inquiry. In order to inform practice and better understand the role of body image in college students’ experiences, we recommend research in the following areas. First, why are body image and body size excluded from discussions of socially constructed identities? We believe that one of the reasons for this absence is a normalized belief that individuals have control over their bodies and can therefore choose their positioning in the “normal/abnormal” binary by working out, dieting, wearing makeup, and wearing particular kinds of clothing. As our research suggests, many women students are able to recognize that their sense of “choice” related to their bodies is socially constructed, even if they feel powerless to push back on those constructions in their own lives. To what extent, and in which contexts, does higher education promote body image norms and perpetuate a false or skewed sense of body image “choice”? Since some women rely on cultural norms that allow a wider range of acceptability in women’s body types, might higher education professionals be able to draw attention to those cultures and alternate ways of being? Second, how do women in different areas of study experience their bodies? Our findings suggested some possible differences, with students in Business, Health, and Kinesiology pointing to specific class experiences that may have been influenced by the norms of those fields. Further research specifically on fields that are male dominated and female dominated might yield differences that could be addressed to strengthen the participation of all genders across fields. Third, further research might be replicated with men students. To what extent, and in what ways, do they “mind their bodies” in their educational experiences? To what extent are they conscious of others’ bodies or others’ perception of their bodies in learning environments? Fourth, Choate (2003) pointed out the protective factors that certain cultures afford women in terms of body acceptance. What might higher education in the United States adopt from those cultures in order to promote positive body image for women in Western cultures? Finally, what is the role of key relationships (whether romantic or platonic) in mitigating the effects of negative body image for college students? Are those relationships protective, or do they serve to reinforce and increase the monitoring of women’s body image? Additional scholarly inquiry along these lines would help to inform educational practice that challenges the restrictive norms about women’s bodies in the United States.

In terms of educational practice, our findings suggest that colleges and universities should be mindful of the cultural discourses that they support through their curricula, programming, funding decisions, and communication about priorities. Discourses can suggest particular values, beliefs, and expectations about how educators believe students should lead their lives. It follows that the knowledge and interactions that take place in educational spaces impact how women undergraduate students internalize these beliefs and develop a sense of identity as it relates to body perception (Choate, 2003). Some scholars argue that the pervasive set of beliefs about
weight and beauty prescribed to in United States culture and more specifically in higher education can be damaging to women’s sense of well-being (Malinauskas, Raedeke, Aeby, Smith, & Dallas, 2006; Tirosh, 2006). Bordo (2003) recognized the implausibility of removing oneself from the constant barrage of messages that idealize the picture-perfect woman’s body. Rather than simply condemning these unrealistic and judgmental views about beauty and body size, Bordo opined that educators ought to focus on the positive aspects of femininity and condone a more realistic appreciation of beauty. She advocated for a critical examination of “body talk”, as she stated:

At talks to young audiences ... I don’t tell them to love their bodies or turn off the television—useless admonitions today, and ones I cannot obey myself—but I do try to disrupt, if only temporarily, their everyday immersion in the culture. For just an hour or so, I won’t let it pass itself off simply as “normalcy.” (Bordo, 2003, p. 9)

Bordo’s message can aptly be applied to the contexts of higher education. For example, participants from our study suggested creating curriculum and classroom environments that are sensitive and respectful to the variety of body sizes and images that exist in the classroom and in the broader community. In addition, by politicizing an “idealized” body size and image, it may be possible to ameliorate some of the discomfort that many participants highlighted in their educational experiences in college because they failed to fit the idealized norm of the American woman’s body type (Tirosh, 2006).

Another recommendation supported both by our findings and other scholarly research relates to the need to create space for more open and critical thought and dialogue with regard to the normalized and deeply embedded messages about fitness, health, and body size that are present in everyday curricular and cocurricular activities. It is clear that educators and administrators have the ability to trouble harmful messages and stereotypes about women’s bodies by establishing ground rules for use of safe and productive language around the body and body image in structured educational spaces (Bordo, 2003; Gildersleeve & Kuntz, 2011; Tirosh, 2006). Applying strategies to dislocate conventional assumptions and beliefs in college could move students and faculty toward a shared understanding of knowledge, truth, and reality by exposing students to the variety of ways that humans choose to lead their lives (Rice, 2007). This type of analytical approach would also aid in removing the stigma directed at individuals who identify outside what is considered “normal” body weight and image. The ultimate goal with these methods would be to reach a better understanding about what both students and faculty agree to be a comfortable, healthy, and safe environment for effective learning to take place.

CONCLUSION

The panoptical forces related to an idealized body image for women are strong in higher education as in the rest of society. For the women students in our study, these forces were explicated in and supported through social relationships with peers, interactions with faculty members, and during specific educational experiences, as well as through families, culture, and media. Our research highlights the extent to which learning, teaching, and leading are always engaged by embodied minds. Recognizing the role of the mind/body connection as
part of an individual's identity development sheds light on a critical component of the college student experience.

We do not suggest in this article that those of us in higher education—students, faculty, staff, and leaders—can somehow escape the yard in which the Panopticon monitors our bodies. However, we do suggest that this research can help students and ourselves better understand how we support and perpetuate the normalizing effects of our social constructions of ideal bodies, and how these internalized notions of self implicate understandings of beauty and body image. Given the critical developmental role that college experiences play in developing self-authored persons (Baxter Magolda, 2004), we believe it is important that educators challenge the narrowness of those constructions that are so strongly reinforced in college students' lives. We can also acknowledge how learning, teaching, and leading are always engaged by embodied minds within minded bodies.

REFERENCES


