

Sample Research Proposal for the Department of Psychology Chair's Minority/Underrepresented
Research Grant

The Roles of Body Image and Self-Esteem in Breast Cancer Treatment Decisions

Project Overview

Breast cancer is the second most commonly diagnosed cancer among women, and has the second highest mortality rate (U.S. Breast Cancer Statistics, 2019). While modern medicine and research have extended the life expectancy and quality of life for those affected by different cancers, patients are often faced with extremely difficult, stressful, and complex treatment decisions upon diagnosis. This is particularly true for breast cancer, as it can be treated in a multitude of ways that depend upon characteristics of the cancer and the condition of the patient. Importantly, one critical difference between breast cancer and other types of cancers is that, in patients with breast cancer, physicians may suggest a lumpectomy or a mastectomy to surgically remove the tumor, which would entail removing part of or the whole breast. Critically, both of these surgeries alter the physical appearance of women, which can play an important role in shaping a woman's sense of identity, attractiveness, and self-esteem.

Most research on this topic has examined how removal of the breast in cancer patients impacts coping. Generally speaking, breast removal surgeries have a negative impact on body image satisfaction and self-esteem, which can have long term psychological consequences. Indeed, women who had undergone mastectomies had decreased levels of comfort in social interactions and physical intimacy (Prates, 2017). Moreover, up to 77% of women that have been treated for breast cancer will experience some degree of body image distress (Lewis-Smith, 2018), which has caused increases in research for interventions to help survivors adopt a more positive body image and self-esteem.

While understanding the costs of such surgeries on cancer survivors is important, there is a lack of research on the psychosocial factors that influence decision making for treatment options that vary in their degree of breast removal. The goal of the current research is examine the roles of body image, self-esteem, social comparison, attractiveness, age, and role status (e.g., relationships, children) in women's decision making after a hypothetical breast cancer diagnosis. Importantly, one aim is to better understand what factors might motivate a woman to choose treatment options that vary across key dimensions relevant to efficacy and invasiveness of the surgery in altering physical appearance. Gaining a better understanding of how people make decisions can help design decision aids that can assist people with complex and stressful decision.

Budget Justification

The money from this grant will be used to recruit a non-student, adult sample through MTurk. Given that college students are relatively healthy and young, offering monetary compensation to an online adult sample would attract a wider variety of age groups and health backgrounds. This will help to produce more valid, representative data that can then be used to better understand how patients make treatment decisions.