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Predictors of Body Dissatisfaction Among Adolescent Females

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Body dissatisfaction is a problem that has received much attention in our society during recent decades. Body dissatisfaction can be defined as the subjective negative evaluation of one's figure or body parts. It is estimated that as many as 10 million women and 1 million men suffer from anorexia nervosa, another 25 million are estimated to be affected by bulimia nervosa (Shisslak, Crago, & Estes, 1995, as cited in Park, 2005). Young women have been considered at the highest risk for these eating disorders, and it is estimated that 15 percent of young women struggle with an eating disorder (Levchuck, Kosek, & Drohan, 2000, as cited in Park, 2005). Approximately 25 percent of adolescent girls report clinically significant levels of body dissatisfaction (Stice & Whitenton, 2002). Body dissatisfaction is beginning with younger ages. Research shows that 40 percent of 6- year- old girls wished they were thinner (Park, 2005).

Although there is evidence that body dissatisfaction predicts the onset of eating pathology and depression, more studies are needed to investigate the predictors of body dissatisfaction. This paper will explore a plethora of what current research says about predictors of body dissatisfaction for adolescent females. More specifically, the paper will focus on peer relationships, the pressures to be thin from social environment and the media, internalization of thinness, social support deficits, and body mass index as predictors of body dissatisfaction for adolescent females.

Peer Relationships

Peer relationships are a predictor of female adolescents' level of body dissatisfaction. The importance of peer relationships in the life of adolescent girls has been established. Peer relationships affect the adolescent females' self-esteem, provide emotional support, and contribute to the formation of identity. During adolescence, girls experience an increase in self-awareness and self-consciousness. The support from positive relationships with peers is important to a healthy self-image. These positive relationships with peers may provide validation about the adequacy of a girl's appearance and are correlated to positive body satisfaction. Research has supported the notion that fewer body image worries can be predicted by acceptance by friends and perceived social support. One study explored whether poorer friendships can predict weight concerns and dietary restraint in adolescent girls. The study found that the friendship variables which

included acceptance by friends, perceived social support, friendship intimacy, and perceived impact of thinness on female friendships, contributed significantly to the prediction of body image concern, body dissatisfaction, and restrained eating (Gerner & Wilson, 2005).

Theoretical and empirical literature suggests that there is a relationship between body dissatisfaction and aspects of friendship quality, especially negative aspects of friendship relationships. Research also suggests that body dissatisfaction is associated with the belief that thinness is important to positive peer relationships. Schutz and Paxton (2007) conducted a study that examined relationships between adolescent females' body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, quality of same-sex peer relationships, and beliefs about thinness in interpersonal relationships, before and after controlling for depression. Body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, and negative friendship qualities had consistent relationships. Positive friendship qualities, such as friend communication, friend trust, and peer acceptance, did not show a relationship with body dissatisfaction. These types of studies demonstrate the significance of taking into account negative aspects of peer relationships, social anxieties, and beliefs about the importance of thinness in the peer environment, as well as depressive symptoms, in interventions for body dissatisfaction (Schutz & Paxton, 2007).

The role of friendship networks and peer influences in relation to body image concern, dietary restraint, extreme weight loss behaviors, and binge eating in young adolescent females has also been studied. Results of this study indicated that friendship groups had similar dieting behaviors, extreme weight loss behaviors, but not similar body image concern. Perceived peer influence among the friendship groups correlated significantly with dieting, extreme weight loss behaviors, and binge eating. Further analyses revealed that perceived peer influences in weight-related attitudes and behaviors were predictive of individual girls' level of body image concern. Findings such as this reveal the importance of peers in body image and eating problems for females during early adolescence (Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007).

Pressure to Be Thin From Social Environment and Media

Pressures to be thin can originate from many different sources, such as parents, peers, partners, and the media. The sources may directly or indirectly pressure the adolescent to be thin. For example, a parent may directly encourage a daughter to diet, or a peer may indirectly pressure by voicing admiration of a skinny model seen on TV (Stice & Whitenton, 2002).

Sociocultural pressures to be thin as risk factors for body dissatisfaction have received much theoretical attention. It has been proposed that pressure to be thin from one's social environment increases body dissatisfaction because when the message that one needs to be thinner is repeated, the individual will feel discontent with their physical appearance (Striegel-Moore, Silberstein, & Rodin, 1986, as cited in Stice & Whitenton, 2002). Research has supported the notion that perceived pressure to be thin predicts subsequent increases in body dissatisfaction (Stice & Bearman, 2001, as cited in Stice & Whitenton, 2002).

Research has shown that the media adds pressure to be thin. Magazines aimed at younger women portray younger and thinner models than magazines aimed at older women. These younger models in magazines are also less clothed than older models (Bessenoff & Del Priore, 2007). A study conducted by Park (2005) investigated the effect that magazine use has on the longing to be thin within the theoretical framework of presumed influence. The study found that reading beauty and fashion magazines increased the desire for thinness both directly and indirectly. Desire for thinness was increased through the perceived frequency of the thin ideal in mass media, the presumed pressure of the thin ideal on others, and the perceived influence of the thin ideal on self (Park, 2005).

Cahill and Mussap (2007) conducted a study to explore how the changes in emotional states following exposure to images of thin ideal bodies in the media predict unhealthy body change attitudes and behaviors in women and men. The study showed that after exposure to these thin ideal images, women experienced increases in state anger, anxiety, depression, and body dissatisfaction. These increases correlated with drive for thinness and disordered eating symptomatology in women. Another study found that media use predicted disordered-eating symptomatology, drive for thinness, body dissatisfaction, and ineffectiveness in undergraduate women (Harrison & Cantor, 1997).

Internalization of Thinness

Internalization of the current thin ideal set for females and the belief that achieving thinness will result in many different social benefits, such as acceptance and academic success, is also thought to promote body dissatisfaction. The relentless pursuit of an ultra thin body that is not realistic and unattainable promotes dissatisfaction with one's physical appearance (Stice & Whitenton, 2002). One study found that high levels of thin-ideal internalization predicted increases in body dissatisfaction (Stice & Bearman, 2001, as cited in Stice and Whitenton, 2002). Another study showed that an intervention that reduces thin-ideal internalization resulted in less body dissatisfaction (Stice, Mazotti, Weibel, & Agras, 2000, as cited in Stice & Whitenton, 2002)

Social Support Deficits

Interpersonal processes have also been linked to being predictors of body dissatisfaction. Research has implied that social support may play an important role in promoting body image and eating disturbances. Deficits in social support may increase body dissatisfaction because a deficit in unconditional support from family and friends is thought to result in negative feelings about one's physical appearance. It is believed that when an adolescent female feels that she is accepted and appreciated in her own immediate social environment, it will help her feel more positively about herself and her body. Perceived social support may also keep adolescent females from falling into the countless pressures to conform to the thin ideal that fosters body dissatisfaction. (Stice & Whitenton, 2002).

There is research support suggesting that deficits in social support predict eating pathology onset. There has also been research that suggests social support alleviates the negative effects of sociocultural pressures to be thin on the subsequent development of body dissatisfaction (Stice, Spangler, & Agras, 2001, as cited in Stice & Whitenton, 2002).

Conclusion

There is debate amongst the current research over the possible risk factors for body dissatisfaction among female adolescents. It has been noted that it is a possibility that the high levels of body dissatisfaction actually cause the risk factors. For example, body dissatisfaction may cause adolescent females to feel the pressure to be thin (Stice & Whitenton, 2002). Presnell, Bearman, and Stice (2004) also examined risk factors for body dissatisfaction. The study showed that elevations in body mass, negative affect, and perceived pressure to be thin from peers predicted increases in body dissatisfaction. However, in contrast to other research, the study indicated that thin-ideal internalization, social support deficits, and perceived pressure to be thin from family, dating partners, or media do not predict increases in body dissatisfaction.

Because of the severity and importance of this subject further research needs to be conducted to increase our knowledge about possible risk factors for body dissatisfaction among adolescent females.

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