“Mom, quit fat talking—I'm trying to eat (mindfully) here!”: Evaluating a sociocultural model of family fat talk, positive body image, and mindful eating in college women

Jennifer B. Webb, Courtney B. Rogers, Lena Etzel, Meagan P. Padro

A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

A growing evidence base confirms sociocultural theory's predictions regarding the influence of direct exposure to family factors (e.g., parental commentary) in promoting disordered eating behavior as mediated by negative body image. Nevertheless, this model has not been specifically applied to investigating indirect or vicarious exposure to family communications (e.g., negative body talk) in estimating mindful eating behavior via positive body image intervening variables. Therefore, to address this gap the present study provided a preliminary evaluation of the indirect effects of overhearing family fat talk through both body appreciation and functional body appreciation in predicting mindful eating among undergraduate females. Participants included 333 women attending a large southeastern public university who completed measures of mindful eating, family fat talk, body appreciation, and functional body appreciation via an online survey platform. Results indicated that family fat talk was inversely associated with mindful eating, body appreciation, and functional body appreciation. Nevertheless, this model has not been specifically applied to investigating indirect or vicarious exposure to family communications (e.g., negative body talk) in estimating mindful eating behavior via positive body image intervening variables. Therefore, to address this gap the present study provided a preliminary evaluation of the indirect effects of overhearing family fat talk through both body appreciation and functional body appreciation in predicting mindful eating among undergraduate females. Participants included 333 women attending a large southeastern public university who completed measures of mindful eating, family fat talk, body appreciation, and functional body appreciation via an online survey platform. Results indicated that family fat talk was inversely associated with mindful eating, body appreciation, and functional body appreciation. Whereas engaging in mindful eating positively corresponded with both positive body image indices. A regression model controlling for BMI also revealed that an orientation towards appreciating what the body can do (and not a general appreciation of the body) helped explain the inverse association between family fat talk and mindful eating. Our initial findings tentatively suggest that focusing on the self-objectifying and self-denigrating body-related commentary of family members may disrupt attention to one's own appreciation of the (internal) workings of the body thereby undermining the mindful eating process. Implications for further expanding the translation of sociocultural theory in the context of positive body image and mindful eating are considered.

1. Introduction

Evidence supports the Tripartite Influence Model's (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999) predicted relationships between family appearance-related commentary (e.g., weight teasing, critical messages about food choices, etc.) and disordered eating behavior (Rodgers & Chabrol, 2009; Rodgers, 2012). Research further confirms that forms of negative body image indirectly link familial pressures to conform to rigid appearance standards and restrictive eating norms with maladaptive eating patterns with the relationships typically more salient for women and girls (Kluck, 2010; Rodgers, Faure, & Chabrol, 2009a; Rodgers, Paxton, & Chabrol, 2009b). In addition to direct verbal communications about the child's appearance and eating, parents and in particular mothers may also indirectly contribute to creating a heightened appearance-focused family climate through disclosing self-related weight talk (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010). Such appearance-centric verbalizations about one's weight, shape or other aspect of one's physical appearance is reflective of the broader construct of body talk, which may further be categorized into negative, positive, and self-accepting dimensions (Rudiger & Winstead, 2013).

Fat talk is a specific form of negative body talk, which has received considerable attention in the existing literature (see Shannon & Mills, 2015 for a comprehensive review). Fat talk conversations are characterized by vocalizing self-deprecating evaluations of one’s own body (e.g., “I look so fat in these jeans.”) in the presence of others (Shannon & Mills, 2015). Simultaneously, fat talk may also be understood as a relational manifestation of self-objectification or having internalized an outside observer's perspective in relating to one’s body (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Increasingly, research implicates fat talk as a unique contributor to body image distress and is correlated with numerous other adverse consequences, including disordered eating (Shannon & Mills, 2015).
Although most research has examined fat talk within peer relationships (Shannon & Mills, 2015), contemporary scholarship has started exploring this construct as it unfolds within the family environment (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Chow & Tan, 2018; Lydecker, Riley, & Grilo, 2018; MacDonald, Dimitropoulos, Royal, Polanco, & Dionne, 2015; Rogers, Martz, Webb, & Galloway, 2017; Romo & Mireles-Rios, 2016). Like restrictive/critical caregiver eating messages (Kroon Van Diest & Tylka, 2010) and negative parental weight-related commentary (Berge, Trotholz, Fong Blue, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2015; Wansink, Latimer, & Pope, 2017), overhearing fat talk transpiring among family members may serve many functions that impact body image and eating behaviors. These may include reinforcing the importance of the thin ideal and reminding women that they are valued largely for their appearance (i.e., body objectification). In this context, the present study extends previous research grounded in the sociocultural model supporting the specific role of family influences (i.e., parental commentary) on negative body image and maladaptive eating processes in college women in two important ways (Kluck, 2010; Rodgers et al., 2009b). First, to address the limitations of earlier scholarship which relied on a single-item to measure parental weight talk (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010), we selected a recently developed and validated measure of family fat talk which captures a more comprehensive assessment of the construct (MacDonald et al., 2015). Second, research applying the sociocultural model in accounting for variability in the experiences of positive body image and adaptive eating processes are limited (e.g., Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2011; Avalos & Tylka, 2006; Tylka & Homan, 2015).

Pursuing this latter aim is responsive to the modern zeitgeist of theory and scholarship guided by the Positive Psychology movement and the integration of Eastern approaches to promoting well-being (e.g., mindfulness) as applied to the domains of eating and body image (Franson et al., 2009; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a). Indeed, contemporary science confirms the need to bolster efforts to not only focus on mitigating risk for negative body image and disordered eating but to also give increased attention to a complementary focus on stimulating positive forms of embodiment (Piran, 2015). Thus, it is integral to continue to identify sociocultural factors that may predict adaptive forms of embodiment as a first step towards the subsequent development of health promotion programs targeting enhancing positive body image and healthy eating protective factors that may also serve to reduce the risk for the development of negative body image and unhealthy eating practices (Halliwell, 2015; Piran, 2015).

Therefore, the current analysis provides a preliminary evaluation of a partial sociocultural model of mindful eating informed by the Tripartite Influence framework (Rogers et al., 2009b; Thompson et al., 1999) in a college female sample. This model featured the frequency of overhearing family members engaging in fat talk as the principal contextual influence variable and two measures of positive body image operationalized as body appreciation and functional body appreciation as potential mediators. Mindful eating is an approach to food intake characterized by a nonjudgmental awareness of and response to bodily cues that indicate hunger and satiety (Franson et al., 2009). It is also defined by an intentional focus on food while consuming it (i.e., paying attention to sensory properties and singularly focusing on the act of eating; Franson et al., 2009). A growing body of scholarship supports the numerous health benefits associated with this embodied eating practice (Beshara, Hutchinson, & Wilson, 2013; Franson et al., 2009; Hulbert-Williams, Nicholls, Joy, & Hulbert-Williams, 2014; Hutchinson, Charters, Prichard, Fletcher, & Wilson, 2017; Jordan, Wang, Donatoni, & Meier, 2014).

Body appreciation, the more general positive body image concept, reflects holding favorable attitudes towards one’s body, taking care of the body via adaptive health behaviors, respecting one’s body, and protecting the body by rejecting the narrowly-defined media ideal as the exclusive metric of beauty (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). Whereas for example, functional body appreciation, a more specific concept is described as being grateful for the body’s performance capacities and what it enables the individual to do or experience (Rubin & Steinberg, 2011). Women with positive body image may have grown up in an environment that encourages them to focus on aspects of their body other than appearance (such as what the body can do), which may discourage self-objectification (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Menzel & Levine, 2011).

For instance, increased levels of body appreciation have been linked to lower frequency of negative body talk amongst women (Wasylkiw & Butler, 2014). Wasyliw and Butler (2014) further found that engaging in more exercise-related talk with friends predicted body appreciation through body-as-process (i.e., valuing body functionality and competence; Franzoi, 1995) variables in young adult women. Meanwhile, Rubin and Steinberg (2011) found that higher levels of functional body appreciation attenuated the association between body surveillance (a measure of self-objectification) and engaging in unhealthy prenatal behaviors in their sample of first-time moms to be.

It is plausible that women who frequently recall noticing family members engaging in self-objectifying fat talk conversations may be less attuned to body functionality and more focused on environmental or other external cues for governing food consumption (Avalos & Tylka, 2006) which is contradictory to the experience of mindful eating. Mindful eating involves a responsiveness to appetitive cues representing sensitivity to the inner workings of the body (i.e., a specific form of body functionality). Therefore, we reasoned that engagement in mindful eating conceptualized as a self-care practice may reflect an appreciation for the body overall and may particularly demonstrate the ability to access an internal body orientation that represents an appreciation for how the body functions.

Drawing upon the aforementioned sociocultural model and emerging evidence base, we hypothesized that more frequent exposure to family fat talk would be inversely associated with mindful eating, body appreciation, and functional body appreciation in our college female sample. Meanwhile, higher levels of mindful eating were expected to correspond with higher levels of positive body image. We additionally anticipated significant indirect effects of family fat talk on mindful eating via both positive body image variables controlling for BMI would emerge.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The study sample comprised 3621 undergraduate females from a large publicly-funded institution located in the Southeastern United States. The mean age was 19.4 years (SD = 1.5) and the sample was predominantly White/European American (62%) and Black/African American (21%). The remainder of participants identified as Asian or Asian American (4%), Hispanic or Latina (6%), American Indian/Alaska Native (< 1%), Multi-ethnic/racial (6%), and Other (1%). The majority of the sample consisted of freshman and sophomore students (76.5%) and 86.5% of the sample were non-psychology majors. The participants had an average body mass index (BMI) of 23.5 kg/m² (SD = 4.9; “normal weight” range) with 26.8% of the sample classifying as higher weight with a BMI ≥ 25 kg/m² (i.e., “overweight” and “obese”).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Demographics

A demographic measure was administered to gather the following

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1 Please note that this analysis was drawn from a larger data set and results using entirely separate variables with the exception of socio-demographics and BMI have been reported elsewhere (Webb & Hardin, 2016).
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