



Body image variability: the influence of body-composition information and neuroticism on young women's body dissatisfaction

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Abstract

The current studies consider the effect of body size, body composition feedback, and the moderating influence of neuroticism (N) on three measures of body dissatisfaction (BD) in young women. In Study One, normal-sized subjects who were given false feedback indicating that they were either fatter or leaner than average showed heightened BD compared to groups who received either accurate or no feedback about body size. There was no evidence of a moderating effect of N. In Study Two, thinner-than-average subjects who received accurate body-size feedback showed greater satisfaction than a control group receiving no information. For heavier than average subjects, feedback only increased BD for those low on N. Although these results show mixed support for N as a moderator, they are the first to show an effect of body composition information on BD.

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Although body image has been studied in a formal way since the early part of the 20th century, immense growth of popular and academic interest in this area has occurred over the past 25 years (Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). During this time, research has focussed on the basic qualification and quantification of body-image disturbance, and has moved to a more sophisticated

study of associated psychological and physiological factors. In the research literature, body image has been generally viewed as a relatively stable trait, whether defined conceptually or operationally (Cash, 1990, 2002). However, at the same time, there has been an almost unchallenged assumption that cultural pressures on women influence the desire to be thin over time (e.g., Levine & Smolak, 1996). If body image can be modified over the long term, it is arguable that it can be modified in the short term as well. Implicitly, this requires that body image has a 'state' component, with the potential for short-term modification (Cash, 2002).

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In fact, many short-term situational factors can influence changes in body image. For example, it has been shown that body image fluctuates across a woman's menstrual cycle (Altabe & Thompson, 1990), is affected by the perceived scrutiny of others (Haimovitz, Lansky, & O'Reilly, 1993; Heinberg & Thompson, 1992), by transient mood states (Henriques, Calhoun, & Cann, 1996; Taylor & Cooper, 1992), and is sensitive to variation in food intake (Thompson, Coovert, Pasman, & Robb, 1993; Wardle & Foley, 1989). Much of the research in this area has focussed on the mass media and its influence on body image (e.g., Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Grogan, Williams, & Conner, 1996; Hamilton & Waller, 1993; Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Heinberg & Thompson, 1995; Irving, 1990; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994; Tiggemann & Slater, 2004).

A variable that has been considered less frequently is body-size feedback. This is important, since there are numerous encouragements and means available for members of the public to compare their body size measurements to celebrities, athletes, peers, or to recommended standards. BMI tables and calculators can be found everywhere from websites to the back of cereal boxes. If individuals are not making comparisons on their own, they will often be encouraged to do so by health professionals. In fact, it is expected that most formal and even informal weight-loss schemes will incorporate the monitoring of body size into their programs. Although this type of feedback has traditionally been considered an essential component of behaviour change (Korotitsch & Nelson-Gray, 1999; Wing & Hill, 2001), there is a real possibility that for some individuals, significant psychological distress may be associated with frequent weighing. Although some studies have shown evidence for adverse effects such as compromised mood and self-esteem associated with weight feedback (McFarlane, Polivy, & Herman, 1998; Ogden & Evans, 1996; Ogden & Whyman, 1997), none has yet reported a statistically significant effect on measures of body image as such.

However, methodological limitations of previous research may have affected these conclusions about the potential for body image to be modified in the short term. For example, McFarlane et al. (1998) used the Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ; Cooper, Taylor,

Cooper, & Fairburn, 1987) as their measure of body dissatisfaction (BD); yet, most items on the BSQ require an assessment of how often subjects have felt or behaved that way in the *past* (e.g., 'Has feeling bored made you brood about your shape?' and 'Have you vomited in order to feel thinner?'). This instrument should be seen as a trait rather than state measure of body dissatisfaction, and as such, the lack of a significant effect may not be surprising. Ogden and Evans (1996) randomly assigned both men and women to receive manipulated weight feedback but found no effect on body image. However, they acknowledged that despite randomization, the groups showed significant differences in body size at baseline, confounding cross-group comparisons.

In one of the first studies of its kind, Heinberg and Thompson (1992) gave negative (that the subject was heavier than average) or positive (that she was lighter than average) body size feedback to normal weight college females. In addition, subjects were told their body size was being compared either to other college females, or to the U.S. population in general. They found that the type of feedback had no effect on any of the various outcome variables, including self-esteem, mood state, and body dissatisfaction. However, simply being compared to other college females—regardless of the type of feedback—increased subjective distress and body image anxiety. It should be noted that there was no control group that received neutral information, or no information, with which to compare the experimental groups. One purpose of the present study was to consider the effect of explicit body size feedback on body dissatisfaction using a research design that incorporated controls not present in previous studies.

Despite some inconsistencies, it seems clear that a variety of situational factors have the potential to alter aspects of body image. Research now must move to the question of why some individuals are more affected than others. This can only be answered by considering the possible moderating effects of individual differences that qualify the nature of the relationship between two variables by stating the boundaries and conditions under which that relationship holds. Moderators may be qualitative or quantitative, and may be measured, or manipulated, in the research paradigm (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Holmbeck, 1997). In the familiar terms of ANOVA (or

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