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Age of onset and body dissatisfaction in obesity

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Abstract

This study investigated variation in body dissatisfaction among obese women in relation to age of onset of obesity, and evaluated the contribution of teasing about weight and self-esteem as possible causes of higher body dissatisfaction in the early-onset group. One hundred and five obese women (body mass index [BMI] ≥ 30), recruited from clinical settings in England, completed a mailed questionnaire. The early-onset group (by age 16) had a higher BMI, greater body dissatisfaction, and lower self-esteem. Predictably, they also reported more childhood teasing. Path analyses confirmed our expectation that early onset of obesity has an adverse effect on body image, which is independent of current BMI. Regression analyses failed to support the hypothesized mediating role of either childhood teasing or lower self-esteem. The possible direction of causal effects between body dissatisfaction and self-esteem is discussed, with the suggestion that early onset of obesity increases the risk of body dissatisfaction, which in turn impairs self-esteem. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Over the last few years, research investigating the psychological correlates of obesity has begun to move away from comparisons between obese and normal weight groups towards a ‘second generation’ of studies (Friedman & Brownell, 1995) concerned with variation in psychological well-being within obese groups. This approach acknowledges the heterogeneity of obesity and aims to examine the cognitive, emotional, and social factors, which can increase the risk of psychological distress or eating disturbance among obese people.

Body image disturbance or body dissatisfaction has been one of the major areas of research in the field of eating disorders (Thompson, 1995). Body image disturbance is widely acknowl-

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edged to be associated with increased psychological distress and to be a risk factor in the aetiology of eating disturbance and disorders (Button, Loan, Davies, & Sonuga-Barke, 1997; Ricciardelli, Tate, & Williams, 1997). While being prevalent in normal-weight groups (especially adolescent girls), it has also been found to be widespread in obese populations (e.g., Foster, Wadden, & Vogt, 1997; Smith, Thompson, Raczynski, & Hilner, 1999). More importantly, however, body image varies significantly, even among the obese, with some obese people having a reasonably positive view of their physique, while others are severely distressed (Hill & Williams, 1998).

In community samples of adolescents or adults, BMI contributes significantly to body dissatisfaction (Caldwell, Brownell, & Wilfley, 1997; Wardle & Marsland, 1990), and obese groups tend to have higher body dissatisfaction than nonobese comparison groups (Sarwer, Wadden, & Foster, 1998). However, associations have been inconsistent among the obese. Positive associations between BMI and body dissatisfaction have been observed in some studies (Akan & Grilo, 1995; Hill & Williams, 1998), but several clinical studies have found no evidence for greater body dissatisfaction among those who are more obese (Foster et al., 1997; Grilo, Wilfley, Brownell, & Rodin, 1994; Sarwer et al., 1998). Sarwer et al. (1998) suggest that severity of body dissatisfaction among obese women is likely to be affected by factors other than BMI, emphasising the importance of *perceptions* of overweight, rather than objective BMI. In their weight loss study, Foster et al. (1997) comment that relatively small reductions in weight might have a significant impact on body image, thereby reducing the correlation between amount of weight loss and improvements in body image. It is also worth noting that, in both these studies, approximately a third of participants were African Americans. Given that the relationship between BMI and body image varies with ethnicity (Altabe, 1996), this could affect the results. Grilo et al. (1994) used *weight* in correlational analyses, rather than BMI, which might also affect the strength of the association.

While higher levels of obesity in adulthood may not necessarily cause body dissatisfaction, there is evidence that becoming obese at an early age does increase vulnerability (Grilo et al., 1994; Hill & Williams, 1998). Grilo et al. (1994) found that obese adults who had been obese since childhood had substantially higher levels of body dissatisfaction than those who became overweight as adults. Hill and Williams (1998) found that those women who were most obese were most likely to have been overweight as children (before aged 10), and also to have poorer body image. Their analyses do not directly examine the relationship between age of onset and body dissatisfaction, but their data provide support for an association between early onset of obesity and increased body dissatisfaction in adulthood.

One possible explanation for the link between age of onset and body image is that obesity in children is likely to attract teasing and according to the 'negative verbal commentary hypothesis' (Thompson, Coover, Richards, Johnson, & Cattarin, 1995), childhood teasing has an important influence on body image. Using covariate structure modeling in a sample of adolescent girls, they inferred that the influence of weight status on body image is mediated by weight-related teasing, and, in a longitudinal follow-up, they found that teasing at baseline was independently predictive of body dissatisfaction at follow-up, providing strong support for the influence of teasing on body image. Most studies looking at the impact of teasing have focused on nonobese, adolescent populations (Schwartz, Phares, Tantleff Dunn, & Thomp-

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