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The relationship between sociocultural pressure to be thin and body dissatisfaction in preadolescent girls

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationships among sociocultural pressures to be thin, internalisation of the thin ideal, social comparison, body mass index, and body dissatisfaction in young girls. One hundred and fifty-three 10–13 year old girls completed measures assessing sociocultural pressure to be thin, media exposure, body dissatisfaction, social comparison, and internalisation of the thin ideal. Although sociocultural factors, as a group, were significantly associated with internalisation of the thin ideal, perceived media pressure was the only sociocultural influence uniquely related to internalisation of the thin ideal. Perceived pressure to be thin delivered by the media was found to be associated with body dissatisfaction via internalisation of the thin ideal. The relationship between internalisation of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction was also partially influenced by social comparison. Body mass was found to have a direct association with body dissatisfaction. A model incorporating the relationships among media pressure, internalisation of the thin ideal, social comparison, and body dissatisfaction is proposed.

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1. Introduction

While increasing rates of obesity in the general population have been noted, and some weight control behaviours are considered healthy, many women who are within the normal

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weight range still express dissatisfaction with some aspect of their body shape or weight (Brownell, 1991; Huon, 1994). Indeed, the term normative discontent has been used to describe the pervasiveness of body image concerns among women in our society (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985). In recent times, this preoccupation with body image has extended downwards from adult and adolescent women to prepubescent girls with approximately 39% of Australian girls aged between 8 and 12 years reporting significant levels of body dissatisfaction (Kelly, Ricciardelli, & Clarke, 1999; Rolland, Farnill, & Griffiths, 1997). Unfortunately, girls who report high levels of body dissatisfaction also engage in unhealthy weight loss behaviours such as restricting food intake, purging, and over-exercising behaviours that have a number of detrimental health effects including retarded growth and delayed puberty (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). Therefore, further research on risk factors associated with body dissatisfaction in preadolescent girls is critical to inform future prevention and treatment programs.

Although a wide range of factors have been found to play a role in the development and maintenance of body image disturbance and disordered eating behaviours, sociocultural values in Western society, particularly those portrayed in mainstream media, are frequently proposed as a major contributor to the increase in women's body dissatisfaction (e.g., Stice, 1994). Media sources have increasingly reflected a view that the thin look is both desirable and obtainable, when it is in fact difficult for the average woman to achieve without resorting to extreme or unhealthy weight loss efforts (Brownell, 1991). Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, and Stein (1994) investigated the extent to which young women may be influenced by the portrayal of such values by the media. In a sample of undergraduate women, Stice et al. found a direct relationship between media exposure to a high proportion of ideal body images and disordered eating behaviour in a sample of undergraduate women.

Theoretical models investigating the specific mechanisms by which sociocultural factors influence body image and disordered eating behaviours, have only recently appeared in the literature. Stice et al. (Stice, 1994, 1998; Stice, Ziemba, Margolis, & Flick, 1996) have proposed three primary sources of sociocultural influences—families, peers, and the media. It has been suggested that these three sources of sociocultural pressure, individually or in combination, may lead to individuals internalising societal messages about the importance of thinness and that this, in turn, may lead to a schematic set of beliefs about the importance of thinness and beauty for success in a woman's life (Smolak, Levine, & Schermer, 1999; Stice, 1998). Furthermore, the relative influence of these three sources are thought to be transmitted via two processes—*perceived pressure to be thin* and *modelling* of disordered eating behaviours (Stice, 1998). Perceived pressure to be thin is defined as comments or actions by others that may serve to perpetuate the thin ideal (e.g., critical comments regarding weight, encouragement to diet, and exposure to media containing thin ideal images), whereas modelling refers to the process of directly copying a behaviour performed by others (Bandura, 1969). To support this proposal, Stice (1998) found perceived pressure to be thin by family, peers, and the media to be positively correlated with bulimic symptoms, and family and peer modelling of dysfunctional eating behaviours to be predictive of bulimic symptoms over a 9-month period in a sample of undergraduate women.

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