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# Women's body dissatisfaction, social class, and social mobility

Lindsay McLaren<sup>a,\*</sup>, Diana Kuh<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Department of Community Health Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, University of Calgary, G230 Health Sciences Building, 3330 Hospital Drive NW, Calgary, Alta. T2N 4N1, Canada*

<sup>b</sup> *MRC National Survey of Health and Development, University College London, UK*

## Abstract

Several studies indicate that socially advantaged women are more dissatisfied with their bodies than socially disadvantaged women. These findings have been based on women's current social class, and no attention has been paid to the social class of her family of origin or to intergenerational social mobility. In the present research 912 54-year-old women from a prospective birth cohort study provided self-report data on current body esteem (appearance and weight dimensions). Childhood and adult social class (manual versus non-manual) were defined based on father's occupation and own or partner's occupation, respectively. This information and the highest educational qualifications recorded by age 26 were gathered prospectively. Indicators of current and adolescent body mass index (BMI) were computed from height and weight values collected at ages 15 (or 11) and 53–54 years. Multiple regression was used to examine the relationship between midlife body esteem and childhood social class, adult social class, educational qualifications, and social mobility, unadjusted and adjusted for BMI. Women from the non-manual classes as adults were more dissatisfied with their weight than women from the manual classes as adults, for a given BMI. Adjusting for BMI, downwardly mobile women were more satisfied with their appearance than stable non-manual women. Adjusting for BMI, higher educational qualifications were associated with more dissatisfaction with weight and with appearance, and education appears to be more important than occupationally defined social class in explaining body dissatisfaction. A clearer understanding of the relationship between socio-economic position and body dissatisfaction demands that the following distinctions are made: weight versus appearance satisfaction, education versus occupation, and current social class versus intergenerational social mobility.

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## Introduction

In general, research has demonstrated that for a given body size, socio-economically advantaged women are more dissatisfied with or concerned about their bodies than socio-economically disadvantaged women (Ogden & Thomas, 1999; Wardle & Griffith, 2001). An explanation concerns the role of thinness as a marker of social distinction in industrialised society (Bordo, 1993), which makes it more likely to be valued by individuals higher on the socio-economic spectrum.

Sociological authors have highlighted social class differences in the extent to which investment in and control over the body is considered a 'project' worthy of time and effort (Bourdieu, 1984), a perspective which predicts that socio-economically advantaged individuals are more likely to aspire to, and invest effort in attaining a particular bodily appearance (which at the present time is thin).

The interrelationship between socio-economic position, body size, and body dissatisfaction is more relevant for women than for men. There is a clear social stratification of body size among women in modern societies with a larger average body size and a higher prevalence of obesity among socially disadvantaged than among socially advantaged women (Wardle,

\*Corresponding author. Tel.: +403-210-9424; fax: +403-210-3818.

E-mail address: lmclaren@ucalgary.ca (L. McLaren).

Waller, & Jarvis, 2002; Sobal, 1991; Sobal & Stunkard, 1989). This relationship is not as strong or as consistent among men (Wardle et al., 2002; Sobal & Stunkard, 1989). Obesity appears to be more strongly stigmatised in women than in men, and there is evidence of demonstrable consequences experienced by women for being obese. Based on US data, Gortmaker, Must, Perrin, Sobol, and Dietz (1993) found that women who had been overweight during adolescence had more negative outcomes 7 years later, including completion of fewer years of school, being less likely to be married, and having higher rates of household poverty, relative to women who had not been overweight. Based on British data, Sargent and Blanchflower (1994) showed that women who had been obese at age 16 earned significantly less at age 23 than women who had not been obese at age 16; this finding was independent of parental social class and baseline ability test score, and was not obtained among men in the sample. Body dissatisfaction is strongly related to body size in females, with larger women more likely to be dissatisfied (Allaz, Bernstein, Rouget, Archinard, & Morabia, 1998; Reboussin et al., 2000). Not surprisingly, the evidence is clear that concern with and distress about bodily appearance (particularly weight) is a highly gendered phenomenon. Women score higher than men on almost any indicator of dissatisfaction with their own bodily appearance (Feingold & Mazzella, 1998). Dissatisfaction with weight is so common among women as to be considered a 'normative discontent' (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985).

Pervasive dissatisfaction with one's weight among women is widely blamed on ubiquitous images of extremely thin women in the media. These media images portray extreme thinness as typical and attainable by all women, and they convey the powerful message that thinness is a prerequisite for physical beauty. This message is believed to have emerged in the mid-1960s with the arrival of 'Twiggy', a fashion model for women who had a childlike body (Brumberg, 1988). There is good evidence that the current 'ideal' of female beauty, operationalised in terms of the size of women presented in the media, is vastly smaller (particularly thinner, but also taller) than the average woman (Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999). And, experimental studies show that exposure to these images negatively impacts on the body image of girls and women who inevitably feel that, against this stringent standard, it is impossible to 'measure up' (for a review see Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Feminist writers (e.g., Orbach, 1978) suggest that body dissatisfaction and eating disorders are an inevitable result of a fundamentally misogynistic society that facilitates these outcomes in women by objectifying their bodies and devaluing their experience. Thus, socio-cultural and feminist perspectives provide viable explanations for the preponderance of body

dissatisfaction in women versus men. However, their utility in explaining social class differences in body dissatisfaction among women is more limited.

Individual socio-economic position is not a uni-dimensional construct, and may be defined in a number of ways including occupation, education, and income. Each of these indicators has been examined for an association with body dissatisfaction or some related construct (e.g., dieting, weight monitoring), and results are not entirely consistent. Among US adult women, Jeffery and French (1996) found that likelihood of dieting increased with increasing income, and that higher income women reported that they would notice a smaller amount of weight gain than lower income women. However higher and lower income women did not differ in the importance they ascribed to body weight, nor in their desired body mass index (BMI). Using a nationally representative British sample, Wardle and Griffith (2001) found that women with higher occupationally defined social class were more likely to perceive themselves as overweight, to monitor their weight more regularly, and were more likely to be trying to lose weight, despite being lighter on average. Jeffery, Adlis, and Forster (1991) studied education in relation to dieting among US adult women, and found that those with more formal education were more likely to have dieted in the past, but were no more likely to report current dieting, than women with less education. Although various indicators of socio-economic position have been examined in relation to body dissatisfaction, it is not clear which indicator is most important in this context. One goal of the present study is to evaluate the association of both occupationally defined social class and education with body dissatisfaction and determine which is the more important determinant.

Existing research on social class and body dissatisfaction has dealt exclusively with women's current socio-economic position, with little or no attention paid to the socio-economic position of her family of origin. Furthermore, to our knowledge there are no studies addressing social mobility over the life span as it relates to adult body dissatisfaction. Research has shown an association between social mobility and obesity, with upward social mobility reducing the likelihood of being obese in comparison with those who remain in the manual classes (Langenberg et al., 2003).<sup>1</sup> Also women who come from lower social class origins are likely to increase in weight more rapidly throughout adulthood (Hardy, Wadsworth, & Kuh, 2000). The close relationship between body size and body dissatisfaction

<sup>1</sup>Correspond to: Claudia Langenberg, MRC National Survey of Health and Development, Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, University College London, 1–19 Torrington Place, London, WC1E 6BT, UK. Tel.: 020-7679-1720, fax: 020-7813-0280, mailto: c.langenberg@ucl.ac.uk

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