



An evaluation of the Tripartite Influence Model of body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance with adolescent girls

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Abstract

The Tripartite Influence Model of body image and eating disturbance proposes that three formative influences (peer, parents, and media) affect body image and eating problems through two mediational mechanisms: internalization of the thin-ideal and appearance comparison processes. The current study evaluated this model in a sample of 325 sixth through eighth grade girls. Simple path analyses indicated that internalization and comparison fully mediated the relationship between parental influence and body dissatisfaction and partially mediated the relationship between peer influence and body dissatisfaction. Additionally, internalization and comparison partially mediated the relationship between media influence and body dissatisfaction. Six a priori SEM models based on the full Tripartite Influence Model were also evaluated. A resulting model was found to be an adequate fit to the data, supporting the viability of the Tripartite Model as a useful framework for understanding processes that may predispose young women to develop body image disturbances and eating dysfunction.

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Introduction

Eating disorders occur at an alarming frequency in adolescent girls and are associated with high levels of emotional distress and physical problems (Thompson & Smolak, 2001). The prevalence of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa in adolescence is similar to that

found in adults (i.e., approximately 0.5 and 1–3.0%, respectively) and subclinical levels of eating disturbance range as high as 10% of adolescent females (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Thompson & Smolak, 2001). Accordingly, researchers in the past few years have invested an enormous amount of effort in attempts to define, measure, and evaluate formative influences that may lead to the onset of such disturbances (Shisslak & Crago, 2001; Stice, 2001; Stice & Hoffman, 2004; Wertheim, Paxton, & Blaney, 2004).

Many variables have been hypothesized to play a role in the onset of body image problems and eating disturbances, including: negative affect, low self-

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esteem, media pressures, social comparison processes, peer influences, internalization of the societally-based thin-ideal, and parental pressures (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999; Wertheim et al., 2004). In fact, investigations into the role of potential risk factors for body image and eating disturbances have proliferated in recent years, however, studies have often been limited by the lack of a theoretical model to guide selection of measures and testing of hypotheses.

In an attempt to develop a model that would incorporate many of the variables hypothesized to have an effect on body image and eating disturbances, Thompson et al. (1999) developed the Tripartite Influence Model. This model is composed of three primary sources of influence (peers, parents, media) that are hypothesized to exert their effect on body image and eating disturbance via two primary mechanisms—appearance comparison and internalization of the thin-ideal. An additional aspect of the model includes a proposed directional link from the restricting component of eating disturbance to bulimia, and a link between bulimia and psychological functioning (e.g., self-esteem, depression).

Fig. 1 (Model 1) details all of the hypothesized relations among variables predicted by this model, as originally outlined by Thompson et al. (1999). Work in our laboratory and that of other investigators has supported the role of specific peer, parental, and me-

dia factors as a predictor of body image and eating problems, using path models and prospective studies (Field, Camargo, Taylor, Berkey, & Colditz, 1999; Field, Camargo, Taylor, Berkey, Roberts, & Colditz, 2002; McKnight Investigators, 2003; Thompson & Stice, 2001). Additionally, the Tripartite Influence Model was supported in a covariance structure modeling study of college women (van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Coovert, 2002), however, only appearance comparison was evaluated as a mediator in this study. To date, the model has yet to be evaluated in an adolescent sample.

Therefore, the current study sought to examine the Tripartite Influence Model as a potential explanatory framework for understanding formative factors that contribute to the development of body image and eating problems. Based on our previous work with adults, it was hypothesized that sociocultural influences (peers, parents, media) and mediational factors (internalization of the thin-ideal, appearance comparison) would predict body dissatisfaction and eating disturbances. Additionally, it was hypothesized that body dissatisfaction would have a direct influence on restriction, which would lead to bulimic symptoms. Several variations of the basic Tripartite Influence Model were also evaluated, along with a specific comparison to another prominent theoretical model (Stice, 2001), in order to provide for an evaluation of competing models.

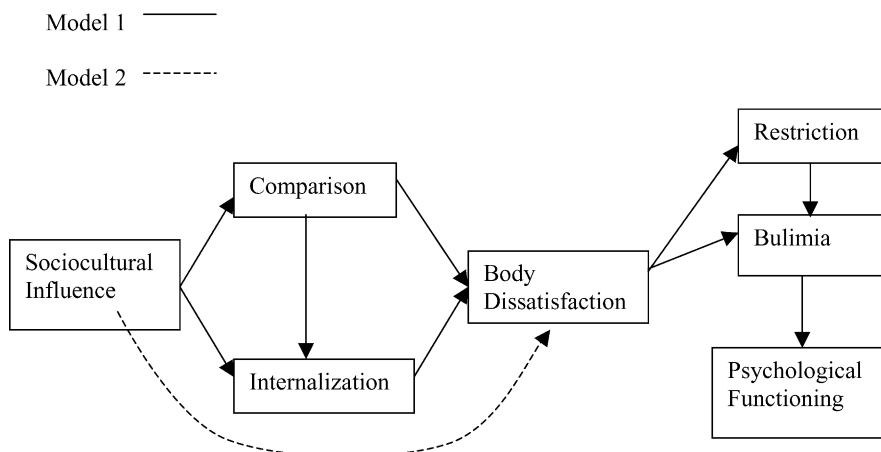


Fig. 1. Hypothetical SEM Models 1 and 2 based on Thompson et al. (1999).

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