

Body dissatisfaction and body change behaviors in Chile: The role of sociocultural factors

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Abstract

With interest in body image and body change behaviors growing around the world, there has been surprisingly little research conducted in Latin America on these issues. In order to gain some understanding of them in this context, this study investigated body image and body change behaviors, and the sociocultural factors that may influence them, among 337 Chilean adolescents aged 12–18 years. Participants completed a questionnaire that assessed BMI, body dissatisfaction, strategies to lose weight and strategies to increase muscle bulk. In addition, perceived pressure from family, peers, and the media to change body shape was evaluated. Results were partially consistent with those reported in Western nations. Girls were found to report greater body dissatisfaction than boys, but no difference was found between males and females in perceived pressure from adults in the family or from older siblings/cousins to lose weight. However, girls experienced higher levels of perceived pressure to lose weight from the media than boys, and boys reported greater perceived pressure from peers to lose weight than girls, and more pressure than girls from all sources to increase muscle bulk. These findings are discussed in relation to research conducted in other contexts, and it is concluded that findings from other locations may not be applied universally.

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Introduction

In recent years, a large number of studies (e.g., Halliwell & Harvey, 2006; Muris, Meesters, van den Blom, & Mayer, 2005; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006) have demonstrated that sociocultural factors may exert an influence on the self-perceptions and attitudes of adolescents that lead to body dissatisfaction and subsequent behaviors aimed at changing their body shape and size. Research suggests that, in general, adolescent girls are more dissatisfied

with their body shape and size than adolescent boys (e.g., Duncan, Al-Nakeeb, Nevill, & Jones, 2006; Parnot et al., 2006), and that many adolescent girls and young adult women engage in an unnecessary pursuit of thinness (Rukavina & Pokrajac-Bulian, 2006; Stice, 1994; Wertheim, Paxton, Schutz, & Muir, 1997). Adolescent boys and young adult men, on the other hand, pursue the muscular mesomorph ideal (Luciano, 2007; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001a; Muris et al., 2005; Smolak, 2004).

Investigations into the causes of body dissatisfaction and the use of body change strategies by adolescents have identified the media, family, and peers as the main transmitters of sociocultural messages about the ideal body build to adolescents. For the most part, these

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messages promote the thin ideal body for girls, as society equates thinness with beauty and attractiveness in women (Murnen, Smolak, Mills, & Good, 2003; Striegel-Moore, Silberstein, & Rodin, 1986). Increased muscularity is largely pursued by adolescent boys, as the attainment of a large and muscular body is tied to cultural views of masculinity and the male sex-role, which prescribe that men be powerful, strong and efficacious (Luciano, 2007; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004a; Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1986; Ricciardelli, McCabe, & Lillis, 2006).

While significant levels of body dissatisfaction and body change behaviors have been clearly identified in Caucasians in North America, Australia and European countries, it is now thought that these phenomena may be emerging in other contexts such as among ethnic minorities in the United States (e.g., Reddy & Crowther, 2007; Roberts, Cash, Feingold, & Johnson, 2006), in Asian countries (e.g., Chen, Gao, & Jackson, 2007; Lee, 2000), and also amongst some indigenous populations (e.g., Ricciardelli, McCabe, Ball, & Mellor, 2004). However, the specific role of cultural context has received little attention in this area. In this study we aimed to identify the extent of body image dissatisfaction and engagement in body change behaviors, and the sociocultural influences on these factors in a new cultural context: Chile in South America.

Chile has a population of around 16 million people who tend not to see themselves as belonging to a Western nation, but to a rapidly developing Latin-American country. However, according to Larrain (2001) Chileans see themselves as being “different” from the rest of Latin American countries, primarily because although colonized by the Spanish, the economic and political systems were derived from England. This heritage is reflected in the popular saying “We Chileans are the British of South America”. In addition, the economic and military structures were modelled on those in Germany and the cultural and intellectual life were strongly influence by the French. Despite this, since the Second World War, the United States has been the most relevant social, cultural and economic referent.

The capital Santiago has a population of over 5 million and Temuco, the city in which the current study was conducted is the fourth largest city with a population of approximately 250,000. The population, of which 95% is white or white-Amerindian, has a literacy rate of 96%. Communications are modern, with almost 11million mobile cellular phones in use in 2005 (Infoplease, 2007). There are more than 63 television broadcast stations and Graham (2003) reports that almost every household in Chile owns a television which tends to be permanently

switched on. Televisions also frequently dominate bars, cafes and less expensive restaurants. However, local television is “dominated by dreadful soaps, half-naked adolescent dance shows and game shows” (Graham, p. 46). The most popular current TV shows are “*Todo Baile*” (Everything is dance) which is a competition of popular artists, models, and TV celebrities who pair up and compete with each other in various dances. Another popular show is “*Pelotón*” (Pelotoon), in which young women and men compete against each other over a range of physical and psychological tests that grow in complexity. The participants are generally tall, slim and good looking, and selected by the program director from hundreds of applicants. Graham reports that Cable TV is also widespread, offering around 80 channels many of which show US films and popular series like *Friends*, *The Simpsons*, and *Cheers* (with Spanish subtitles, or dubbed).

Graham (2003) suggests that compared to some of the neighboring Latin American countries, Chileans are “not a particularly exuberant people, but their passions are aroused by several national enthusiasm—chiefly football and rodeo, which at their best are performed with electrifying skill and theatrically, wrapped up in a fantastic atmosphere. Local and national fiestas provide other opportunities for the Chileans to let their hair down, and usually include a good deal of flag-waving, dancing, singing, drinking and eating” (p. 49). Beach culture is not strong in Chile. Essentially, people enjoy swimming and sunbathing during the summer but this activity is more common in the northern and central regions where the climate is warmer. Water sports are not as popular as in some other countries.

Nearly half the population of Chile is under 25 years of age and 72% is under 40 (Chile Information Project, 2007). The younger population is interested in Western products and fashions as well as aspects of more traditional Chilean culture. For example, while Western music and MTV are popular, so too is Latin American music and dance. It has been proposed that this generation of young Chileans behaves in a liberated manner after the restrictions (e.g., curfews) their parents endured during the Pinochet dictatorship which ended in 1990. It is highly critical of the established institutions of society and all rebellious fashions from the West are copied.

European fashions are followed by clothing designers, and well represented in fashion magazines such as “*Caras*” (Faces), “*Vanidades*” (Vanities). Being constant followers of Western models, Chileans favor tall and thin body images with Caucasian features. With average heights being 1.60–1.65 for women and 1.63–1.68 for

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