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Body dissatisfaction and weight-related teasing: A model of cognitive vulnerability to depression among women

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ABSTRACT

Although a number of studies have linked body dissatisfaction to depressive symptoms, few have done so within the framework of a vulnerability–stress model. We hypothesized that women's levels of body dissatisfaction would interact with recent experiences of vulnerability-congruent negative life events (i.e., weight-related teasing) to predict prospective changes in depressive symptoms. Consistent with these hypotheses, experiences of weight-related teasing were more strongly related to depressive symptom increases among women with high, compared to low, levels of body dissatisfaction. These results support the hypothesis that body dissatisfaction moderates the impact of weight-related teasing on depressive symptom changes.

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1. Introduction

A growing body of research has suggested that body dissatisfaction may contribute risk for depression (e.g., Allgood-Merten, Lewinsohn, & Hops, 1990; Fabian & Thompson, 1989; Laessle, Kittl, Fichter, & Pirke, 1988; Rierdan, Koff, & Stubbs, 1989; Stice, Killen, Hayward, & Taylor, 1998; Thompson, Covert, Richards, Johnson, & Cattarin, 1995). Beginning in adolescence, rates of depression are approximately twice as high for women than for men (Hankin et al., 1998), and research suggests that body dissatisfaction contributes to elevated depression levels above and beyond other risk factors, such as body mass (Stice & Bearman, 2001). The 30-day prevalence of depression among 15–24 year old women is 8% and the lifetime prevalence is 20.8% (Blazer, Kessler, McGonagle, & Swartz, 1994). Given this, young-adult women may be an especially important group upon which to focus when examining risk for depression.

Starting as early as adolescence, girls have significantly higher levels of body dissatisfaction than do boys (Barker & Galambos, 2003; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001). Further, girls who are depressed also have significantly higher levels of body dissatisfaction than boys who are depressed (Bennett, Ambrosini, Kudes, Metz, & Rabinovich, 2005). It has been suggested that the gender differences in depression that first emerge during adolescence are in part a function of the developmental transition that occurs mid-puberty (Angold, Costello, & Worthman, 1998), as well as increased

developmental challenges for girls, such as dissatisfaction with weight (Wichstrøm, 1999). The discrepancy between real and ideal physical appearance is more marked for females than males, and this increased discrepancy may contribute to depressed mood (Higgins, 1987; Strauman, Vookles, Berenstein, Chaiken, & Higgins, 1991; Wichstrøm, 1999). Further, gender differences in depressed mood are substantially reduced when the difference in body dissatisfaction is accounted for (for a review, see Wichstrøm, 1999).

Among college students, women have higher levels of body dissatisfaction, disordered eating habits, and dieting behaviors than men, despite having similar body mass indices (Edman, Yates, Aruguete, & DeBord, 2005). One study found that undergraduate women had higher levels of body dissatisfaction than undergraduate men even when matched on levels of body focus, or the tendency to focus on aspects of the body that are most often associated with reasons for dieting or social acceptance (Lokken, Ferraro, Kirchner, & Bowling, 2003). As such, this may be evidence for why women are at significantly increased risk for depression and eating disorders (Hankin et al., 1998; Hudson, Hiripi, Pope, & Kessler, 2007; Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994).

Despite the established link between body dissatisfaction and depression (e.g., Johnson & Wardle, 2005; Paxton, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006; Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Eisenberg, 2006), the potential risk conveyed by body dissatisfaction is rarely considered within the context of environmental stressors that the individual may also be experiencing. Indeed, most cognitive theories of depression present vulnerability–stress models of risk in which certain cognitions are hypothesized to increase risk for depression in the presence, but not absence, of negative life events (e.g., Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989; Clark,

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Beck, & Alford, 1999). Further, according to Beck's event congruency hypothesis (Beck, 1983, 1987; Clark et al., 1999), depressive reactions should be more likely when there is a match between the specific type of event experienced and the vulnerability exhibited. Building upon Beck's theory, cognitive-interpersonal models of depression (e.g., Hammen, 1992) have emphasized the interaction between specific types of negative cognitive styles and individuals' interpersonal relations in contributing vulnerability to depression. Specifically, negative interpersonal events are hypothesized to activate pre-existing negative schema, which then contribute to depression. Further, it has been suggested that the gender differences seen in depression are, in part, a function of the increasing influence of negative interpersonal life events on emotional maladjustment throughout adolescence (Hankin, Mermelstein, & Roesch, 2007). Not only are females more likely to experience negative interpersonal events than males, but females are also more likely than males to become depressed following these events (Hankin et al., 2007). This said, however, relatively little is known about which specific types of negative interpersonal events may increase risk for depression.

One type of negative interpersonal event that may be particularly salient to individuals with high levels of body dissatisfaction is teasing about one's weight. Research has suggested that perceptions of body dissatisfaction are heavily influenced by social events such as peer, parent, and media influences (van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Coovert, 2002; Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Schutz & Paxton, 2007) and that peer influences among college women affect dysfunctional eating behaviors (van den Berg et al., 2002). Consistent with Beck's (1983, 1987; Clark et al., 1999) cognitive vulnerability-event congruency hypothesis, one would predict that weight-related teasing, which includes messages directly targeted toward a person's body weight and shape, may be more likely than other types of events to "activate" pre-existing thoughts of body dissatisfaction.

The primary goal of the current study was to prospectively examine a specific vulnerability–stress model of depression in women. Building from Beck's cognitive vulnerability-event congruency hypothesis, we hypothesized that women's levels of body dissatisfaction would moderate the link between weight-related teasing and depressive symptoms. Specifically, we predicted that experiences of weight-related teasing would be more likely to predict depressive symptom increases among women with high, compared to low, levels of body dissatisfaction, and that this relation would persist irrespective of actual weight status. Further, we predicted that this moderation would not exist when examining the link between other types of teasing (e.g., general appearance teasing) and depressive symptoms, thus providing a stronger test of Beck's cognitive vulnerability-event congruency hypothesis.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants

Participants in this study were 116 undergraduate women recruited from their introductory psychology classes who participated in exchange for receiving course credit. The mean age was 18.64 years ($SD = .97$). The racial/ethnic background of the participants was as follows: 53% Caucasian, 15% African American, 15% Asian, 9% Hispanic, and 8% other. Of the Time 1 participants, 73.3% ($n = 85$) completed the follow-up assessment. There were no significant differences between completers and attriters on any of the Time 1 variables.

Based on self-reported height and weight, the mean body mass index (as measured by weight in kilograms divided by height in meters squared) was 23.19 ($SD = 3.39$). Therefore, on average,

participants in our sample fell within the normal range of body mass.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Body dissatisfaction

The Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ; Cooper, Taylor, Cooper, & Fairburn, 1987) is a 34-item self-report questionnaire used to assess concerns about weight and body shape, specifically how the individual has been feeling about her/his appearance over the past four weeks (e.g., "Have you felt ashamed of your body?", "Have you felt so bad about your shape that you have cried?"). Responses are on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "always" with higher total scores indicating more body dissatisfaction. The BSQ has demonstrated high retest reliability and strong concurrent validity with measures of self-evaluation and body checking (Rosen, Jones, Ramirez, & Waxman, 1995). The BSQ demonstrated excellent internal consistency in the current study ($\alpha = .98$).

2.2.2. Weight-related teasing

The Physical Appearance Related Teasing Scale (PARTS; Thompson, Fabian, Moulton, Dunn, & Altabe, 1991) is an 18-item scale used to assess appearance related teasing and is composed of two factors: general appearance teasing (GAT) and weight/size teasing (W/ST). Subjects respond on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from "never" to "frequently." Items on the W/ST subscale focus on experiences of teasing in relation to weight and size, such as, "Did others call you derogatory names that related to your size or weight?" and "Did you ever feel like people were pointing at you because of your size or weight?" Items on the GAT subscale focus on experiences of teasing in relation to general appearance, such as, "Did people say you had funny teeth?" and "Did other kids ever make jokes about your hair?" For the current study, the PARTS subscales were modified to assess current teasing that occurred during the follow-up interval. Previous studies have suggested that the subscales exhibit good internal consistency and retest reliability (e.g., Thompson et al., 1991). In this study, the modified W/ST and GAT subscales exhibited excellent internal consistency ($\alpha_s = .96$ and $.96$, respectively).

2.2.3. Depressive symptoms

The Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996) is a 21-item self-report measure that was used to assess the severity of depressive symptoms in the subjects. The BDI-II exhibits good reliability and validity (Beck et al., 1996) and had good internal consistency in this study at both the first and second assessments ($\alpha_s = .92$ and $.95$, respectively).

2.3. Procedure

Participants completed the questionnaires in large groups. At the initial assessment, participants completed the Body Shape Questionnaire and the Beck Depression Inventory-II. At the second assessment, which occurred approximately one month later, participants completed the Physical Appearance Related Teasing Scale (modified as described above to assess experiences of teasing between the two assessment points) and the Beck Depression Inventory-II.

3. Results

Preliminary analyses were conducted to determine if there was significant skew among any of the variables. Variables that exhibited skew were transformed (e.g., square root, log 10, inverse) to satisfy assumptions of normality prior to any further analysis.

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