



Heterosocial involvement, peer pressure for thinness, and body dissatisfaction among young adolescent girls[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 June 2010

Received in revised form

10 December 2010

Accepted 19 December 2010

Keywords:

Mixed-sex interactions

Peer relations

Adolescence

Girls

Body image

Body dissatisfaction

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine longitudinal connections among young adolescent heterosocial involvement (i.e., mixed-sex interactions), peer pressure for thinness, and body dissatisfaction. Three years of self-report questionnaire data were collected from 88 adolescent girls as they completed 6th through 8th grades. Results indicated that the relation between heterosocial involvement and body dissatisfaction was mediated by perceived peer pressure for thinness. Within this model, heterosocial involvement was associated with greater peer pressure for thinness. In turn, peer pressure for thinness was associated with greater body dissatisfaction. Results are discussed in terms of their implications for prevention and intervention efforts aimed at girls during their middle-school years.

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Introduction

Mixed-sex interactions, collectively referred to as “heterosocial involvement,” increase in frequency and salience during early adolescence, when girls and boys combine their respective same-sex friendship groups (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000). Activities such as school functions, boy–girl parties, and casual meetings give young adolescents opportunities to socialize in a mixed-sex environment while maintaining proximity to same-sex friends. These activities are more common during early adolescence than is one-on-one dating, and appear to serve as a bridge to the romantic partner relationships more characteristic of later adolescence (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999).

Within the mixed-sex context, young adolescents experience attraction, learn about their own and others' appeal, and have opportunities for sustained interactions with cross-sex peers. Although these outcomes can be developmentally appropriate, heterosocial involvement may present risks as well (Furman, Ho, & Low, 2007). Most relevant to the present study, heterosocial involvement has been positively associated with body dissatisfaction and unhealthy weight-management practices among adolescent girls (Cauffman & Steinberg, 1996; Compian, Gowen, & Hayward, 2004; Gralen, Levine, Smolak, & Murnen, 1990; Levine, Smolak, Moodey, Shuman, & Hessen, 1994; Smolak, Levine, & Gralen, 1993), indicating that mixed-sex interactions may somehow escalate girls' body-related concerns.

The association between heterosocial involvement and body dissatisfaction has been interpreted as arising from the stress of concomitant biological and social transitions during early adolescence (Cauffman & Steinberg, 1996; Compian et al., 2004; Gralen et al., 1990; Levine et al., 1994; Smolak et al., 1993). However, analyses linking heterosocial involvement to body dissatisfaction via intervening mechanisms have been absent. Although there is consensus that heterosocial involvement is correlated with girls' body dissatisfaction, there are no data illustrating how this association may arise. In the present study, we address this important gap by examining whether one potential mediator, peer pressure for thinness, underlies the relation between heterosocial involvement and body dissatisfaction.

[☆] This research was supported by grants awarded to Dawn M. Gondoli from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (1R03HD041955-01 and 5R03HD041955-02), the University of Notre Dame Graduate School, and the University of Notre Dame College of Arts and Letters.

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Perceived peer pressure for thinness as a mediator

In order for peer pressure for thinness to function as a mediator, it must be associated with both heterosocial involvement and body dissatisfaction. Turning to the first relation, no prior studies have examined the heterosocial involvement and peer pressure for thinness correlation. Nevertheless, findings from several literatures support our hypothesis that heterosocial involvement is positively associated with perceived peer pressure for thinness.

One purpose of heterosocial involvement is to provide adolescents with information about perceived attractiveness and probable success in dating (Connolly et al., 2000). Because young adolescents lack dating experience, they rely on sociocultural norms to guide initial behavior and attributions in the heterosocial context (Laursen & Jensen-Campbell, 1999). Regarding a desirable female appearance, the norms upon which adolescents are likely to rely emphasize thinness as attractive and as a prerequisite for appeal (Smolak, Levine, & Thompson, 2001; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999).

In fact, adolescent girls endorse the beliefs that a girl's thinness is an important factor in determining her attractiveness, popularity with boys, and dating success (Paxton, Norris, Wertheim, Durkin, & Anderson, 2005; Wertheim, Paxton, Schutz, & Muir, 1997). Adolescent boys also report that a girl's slimmness predicts her perceived attractiveness and dating potential (Paxton et al., 2005). Such perceptions appear grounded in reality, as higher weight among adolescent girls lowers the probability of them ever having dated or having dated recently, even among non-obese girls (Halpern, Udry, Campbell, & Suchindran, 1999). Thus, via implicit norms and observable dating patterns, the heterosocial context is likely to contain the message that thinness is a valued attribute. Girls who spend time in emergent heterosocial activities therefore experience an additional social context in which to learn that thinness is important.

Furthermore, because the heterosocial context is highly appearance-focused, body- and thinness-related conversations and comparisons are likely to increase among girls as heterosocial involvement escalates in the young adolescent cohort. Consistent with prior findings, we contend that repeated peer interactions and comparisons about thinness are perceived by girls as peer pressure for thinness (e.g., Hutchinson, Rapee, & Taylor, 2009; Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001; Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999; Shisslak et al., 1999). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that increased heterosocial involvement would predict increased perceived peer pressure for thinness. In turn, peer pressure for thinness is likely to be associated with body dissatisfaction, the second link in our mediated effects view.

Several cross-sectional studies have indeed revealed a positive association between perceived peer pressure for thinness and body dissatisfaction among adolescent girls (e.g., Hutchinson et al., 2009; Jones & Crawford, 2006; Kichler & Crowther, 2009; Lieberman, Gauvin, Bukowski, & White, 2001; Shroff & Thompson, 2006). The relation between peer pressure for thinness and body dissatisfaction has been interpreted as reflecting exposure to the "thin ideal" and subsequent internalization of the message that one's current body size or shape is unacceptable. We are aware of only one longitudinal study that examined relations between perceived pressures to be thin from various sources and body dissatisfaction among adolescent girls and boys aged 16–19 (Presnell, Bearman, & Stice, 2004). Most relevant to the present study, univariate analyses revealed that peer pressure for thinness predicted increases in body dissatisfaction over a 9-month period. However, peer pressure for thinness was no longer a significant predictor of body dissatisfaction once additional predictors such as body mass were considered in multivariate analyses. According to Presnell et al. (2004), the relatively brief follow-up period in their study might have constrained change

in body dissatisfaction, making it difficult for sociocultural variables, such as peer pressure, to account for variation in this change. Clearly, additional longitudinal studies linking peer pressure for thinness to change in body dissatisfaction should be undertaken.

The present study

In this study, we tested a longitudinal model in which the connection between heterosocial involvement and increased body dissatisfaction was mediated by increased peer pressure to be thin. We examined this model in a sample of young adolescent girls. Following guidelines for testing longitudinal mediation (Cole & Maxwell, 2003), we measured all variables at all time points. Because body dissatisfaction has been associated with Body Mass Index (BMI; e.g., Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004), we also evaluated our hypothesized model while controlling for girls' BMIs.

Method

Participants

Data were collected annually from 88 girls as they completed 6th through 8th grade. At the 6th-grade assessment, the participants were between the ages of 11 and 13 ($M = 11.60$, $SD = .54$). Most identified as European American (98%); fewer identified as Latina (1%) or Native American (1%). The annual household income per family ranged from \$10,000 to \$450,000 ($Mdn = \$71,500$, $M = \$91,328$, $SD = \$71,653$). Their families had an average of 2.5 children, and most of the participants' parents were married and living together (92%).

The present data were collected as part of a larger study focusing on the transitions that occur during adolescence. Initial contact letters were distributed to 4th-grade students through primary schools in a medium-sized, Midwestern city. The letter briefly described the study and instructed mothers of 4th-graders to call the research office if interested in participating. To control for prior parenting experience, mother-child dyads were eligible if the 4th-grader was the oldest child in the family. Mothers were informed that the general purpose of the study was to better understand maternal and child adjustment during the transition to adolescence and that they and their children would be asked questions about maternal and child well-being, parenting, and peer relations; body dissatisfaction was not listed as a specific area of inquiry.

As noted, the present analyses focused on girls as they completed grades 6 through 8. These time points were selected for both conceptual and pragmatic reasons. Prior evidence indicates that heterosocial involvement, peer pressure for thinness, and body dissatisfaction increase during the middle-school years, and also show greater variability during this time as compared with late-childhood (Clark & Tiggemann, 2007, 2008; Connolly et al., 2000; Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999; Wardle & Marsland, 1990). Therefore, our selected middle-school time period was most appropriate for our model. In addition, our analysis required that all variables were measured at three time points, and this condition was met during the 6th–8th grade assessments.

Procedure

Each year, mothers and their children visited a university research laboratory for 2 h to separately and independently complete questionnaire packets. As compensation, each dyad was paid \$50 at the 6th-grade assessment, with an increase in this rate by \$10 for each subsequent year; by the 8th-grade assessment, each dyad received \$70. All procedures were approved by a university committee for the protection of human research participants.

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