



# Attachment, the tripartite influence model, and the development of body dissatisfaction

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## ABSTRACT

The tripartite model of influence proposes that three primary core sources of influence—parents, peers and media—contribute to the development of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. In the current study, this model was examined in a sample of 205 undergraduate women. This study added to previous research by investigating mother and father criticism separately and by examining the potential moderating effects of parental attachment in the pathway to body dissatisfaction. Results indicated partial support for the tripartite model of influence. Sociocultural influences (media) were found to be a significant predictor of body dissatisfaction, but not parental or peer criticism. Anxious attachment was found to be a significant moderator on the effects of sociocultural attitudes in body dissatisfaction. Limitations and future research implications are discussed.

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## Introduction

Body dissatisfaction experienced by women in Western societies is so pervasive it has been termed “normative discontent” (Cash & Henry, 1995). Western women are subjected to a cultural standard of beauty that idealizes a thin body size. In societies that value thinness, internalizing a thin ideal is related to body dissatisfaction, which can contribute to serious psychological problems. Body dissatisfaction has been indicated repeatedly to be a potent risk factor for eating disorders (Jacobi, Hayward, De Zwann, Kraemer, & Agras, 2004; Stice & Shaw, 2002).

Since most women in the US are exposed to social pressures and ideals around a thin body type, why are only some women vulnerable to incorporating these ideals into a self-concept that may lead to body dissatisfaction? Recent studies have documented that attachment is an important factor in development of body dissatisfaction (Bamford & Halliwell, 2009; Cash, Theriault, & Annis, 2004; Cheng & Malinkrodt, 2009; McKinley & Randa, 2005). Attachment is a developmental process of forming emotional bonds with others that may have a large impact on an individual's adult adjustment (Bowlby, 1969). One assumption of attachment theory is that the quality of one's early experiences with parental figures shapes how one feels about oneself and others (termed “internal working

models” in the attachment literature) and how comfortable a person is with closeness and separation. Secure attachment styles are associated with higher levels of self-esteem and more positive attitudes toward others, and comfort with both closeness and separation in relationships. Insecurely attached individuals fall primarily into two subtypes. Those categorized as anxiously attached have a positive working model of others but a negative working model of the self and have anxiety around separation and abandonment while desiring closeness. Those categorized as avoidantly attached have a positive model of the self but a negative working model of others and are uncomfortable with closeness/intimacy though more comfortable with separation (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998).

Insecure attachment patterns have been linked to body image and eating disturbances. For example, in a study of women with eating disorders, higher levels of anxious and avoidant attachment patterns were reported than those compared to standardized controls of age-matched women (O'Kearney, 1996). Similarly, Broberg, Hjalms, and Nevonen (2001) compared 18–24 year old eating disorder patients with normal controls. The results indicated that the severity of eating problems was related to security of attachment. Young women with anorexia and bulimia reported higher levels of attachment anxiety than women in a normal control group (Tereno, Soares, Martins, Celani, & Sampaio, 2008). In a review of the literature Ward, Ramsay, and Treasure (2000) concluded that insecure attachment is related to eating problems in both clinical and nonclinical populations.

Additional research has narrowed the focus of insecure attachment and body dissatisfaction primarily to the anxious subtype. Cash et al. (2004) found that anxiety in attachment was related

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to lower body satisfaction, whereas avoidance was unrelated to body dissatisfaction. These researchers also found that anxious romantic attachment was the only predictor of body image disturbance in women, which explained 13.7% of the variance in body image in their sample. In a sample of 224 college women, Cheng and Malinkrodt (2009) found that attachment anxiety was associated with body dissatisfaction, but that this effect was mediated by media internalization. Women with higher attachment anxiety internalized the media thin ideal and the media internalization was in turn associated with body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, attachment anxiety mediated the relationship between mother and father care (measured by memories of parental warmth and expressiveness) and both media internalization and body dissatisfaction. More positive memories of parental care were associated with lower attachment anxiety and in turn lower body dissatisfaction.

Thus, a number of studies have found that attachment anxiety is a factor in the pathway to body dissatisfaction (Bamford & Halliwell, 2009; Cheng & Malinkrodt, 2009; Elgin & Pritchard, 2006). One presumed mechanism is that higher attachment anxiety leads a person to be more “other” oriented and thus susceptible to negative influences from the social environment. Attachment may also play a key role in promoting various social and cultural influences in the development of body dissatisfaction that are highlighted in the tripartite influence model (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999).

The tripartite influence model (Thompson et al., 1999) incorporated three significant sociocultural variables (cultural influences, parental influences, and peer influences) that have been shown to be significant predictors of body image and eating disturbances in prospective studies (Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004). A number of studies have supported the basic tenets of this model. Cusumano and Thompson (1997) found that an individual's level of internalization of cultural standards had more impact on body image disturbance than awareness of cultural standards or simple exposure to idealized media images. However, later research by Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, and Heinberg (2004) concluded that internalization and two scales related to awareness contributed unique variance in the prediction of clinical scales related to eating problems. The two awareness related scales provided information about body types that media sources portray as attractive and assessed if young women felt pressure from these media images to adopt these body types. Tylka and Subich (2004) found a strong positive relationship between measures of internalization of the thin ideal and body image disturbance in a population of female undergraduates. Similar research has uncovered positive associations between awareness and internalization of sociocultural standards of beauty and disordered eating (Griffiths et al., 1999).

Parents are theorized to play a role in the initiation of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders in children and adolescents (Thompson, Cattarin, Fowler, & Fisher, 1995). Parents and peers may directly and/or indirectly foster the thin ideal through teasing or negative verbal commentary and modeling of weight concerns (Levine & Smolak, 2001; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). Bailey and Ricciardelli (2010) concluded that young adult women who received more negative weight related comments tended to compare themselves negatively to others and develop body dissatisfaction and eating disturbances. Shoemaker and Furman (2009) found that pressure to be thin and criticism about weight and body appearance by mother, friend, and romantic partner predicted disordered eating.

Like parents, peers may have a significant influence on the development of eating disorders. Peer relationships are particularly important in adolescence, when intimacy, conformity, and closeness in relationships are important to win approval from

others (Levine, Smolak, Moody, Shuman, & Hessen, 1994). Young women often engage in social comparison to determine their status among peers in regards to adherence to social expectations. Several researchers (Durkin & Paxton, 2002; Striegel-Moore, McAvay, & Rodin, 1986) have suggested that body comparisons are the mechanism through which adolescent girls determine how close their body is to the cultural ideal, and that college women frequently compare themselves to their peers as a means of valuing (or devaluing) themselves. For example, Bailey and Ricciardelli (2010) found that young women, who compared themselves to peers they judged as more attractive than themselves, had higher body dissatisfaction and more eating disturbances than young women who did not engage in body comparisons. In an earlier study, McCabe and Ricciardelli (2001) demonstrated that perceived pressure to be thin from peers was related to disturbances in body image for adolescent girls. Aside from more indirect socio-cultural pressures such as peer modeling, young women also experience direct behaviors and comments from peers in the form of teasing and negative commentary. Thompson and colleagues have conducted studies in which women's body dissatisfaction was repeatedly found to be associated with the reported frequency of weight and size teasing (Fabian & Thompson, 1989; Thompson et al., 1995). Cash and Henry (1995) reported a similar finding that teasing severity was significantly correlated with higher levels of negative body image. In a study by Cash, Winstead, and Janda (1986), women and men who reported that childhood peers teased or rejected them because of their appearance were more dissatisfied with their bodies when compared to non-teased controls. Levine et al. (1994) found these cumulative messages from family, peers, and the media to lead to a strong drive for thinness.

The present study examines the impact of attachment anxiety on the tripartite influence model (cultural influences, parental criticism, and peer teasing around body shape and size) in body dissatisfaction. Young women with higher levels of anxious attachment are expected to be more susceptible to negative cultural, parental, and peer influences shaping their body image. Two hypotheses are proposed:

**Hypothesis 1.** Anxious attachment, cultural influences, mother criticism, father criticism, and peer teasing will all predict body dissatisfaction.

**Hypothesis 2.** Anxious attachment will moderate the relationship between cultural influences, mother criticism, father criticism, and peer teasing and body dissatisfaction.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were recruited from introductory educational psychology courses at a large Midwestern university and received course credit for their participation. The enrollment in these classes was approximately 800 students, of which approximately 600 were female. A total of 215 undergraduate students completed the survey. Seven participants who self-identified as male were discarded from the data pool as the present study is concerned with body dissatisfaction in college women. One female participant was an outlier for both age and year in school and was thus excluded from further analyses. Upon examining residual statistics based on the multivariate regression, two additional participants were identified as univariate outliers (over 3 standard deviations from the mean on one of the key variables) and also excluded from further analyses. No multivariate outliers were identified. The remaining sample of 205 participants had mean age of 19.84 years ( $SD = 1.05$ ; range = 18–23). Participants were freshman-level students (8.3%),

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