



Body dissatisfaction from adolescence to young adulthood: Findings from a 10-year longitudinal study

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ABSTRACT

Given mixed findings regarding the unique trajectories of female and male adolescents' body dissatisfaction over time, comprehensive longitudinal examinations are needed. This 10-year longitudinal, population-based study, with 1902 participants from diverse ethnic/racial and socioeconomic backgrounds in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area, examined changes in body dissatisfaction from adolescence to young adulthood. Results revealed that: (a) female and male participants' body dissatisfaction increased between middle and high school, (b) body dissatisfaction increased further during the transition to young adulthood, and (c) this increase was associated with an increase in BMI over time, such that the upward trend in body dissatisfaction became nonsignificant when BMI was controlled. These results highlight a trend in which diverse female and male youth are increasingly dissatisfied with their bodies as their BMI increases from middle school to young adulthood, and emphasize the need for targeted prevention efforts to intervene in this trajectory and mitigate potential harm.

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Introduction

Body dissatisfaction has emerged as a predictor of a broad range of disordered eating and weight-related outcomes, including frequent dieting (e.g., Ackard, Croll, & Kearney-Cooke, 2002; Neumark-Sztainer, Paxton, Hannan, Haines, & Story, 2006), bulimic symptoms and dietary restraint (e.g., Cooley & Toray, 2001; Neumark-Sztainer, Wall, Guo, Story, Haines, & Eisenberg, 2006), and weight gain (van den Berg & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007). In addition, body dissatisfaction has been identified as a risk factor in the development of related psychopathology, including symptoms of depression (e.g., Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Eisenberg, 2006), and as a mediator of the relationship between body mass index (BMI) and psychological health outcomes, including self-esteem (e.g., Mond, van den Berg, Boutelle, Hannan, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2011; Wertheim, Koerner, & Paxton, 2001) and depressive mood (Mond et al., 2011). Given its negative health outcomes, it is important to know whether body dissatisfaction tends to dissipate over time, as adolescents transition into young

adulthood, or whether body dissatisfaction in fact remains high. Longitudinal examinations are needed to more comprehensively track the course of adolescents' body dissatisfaction over time.

Gender differences in the development of body dissatisfaction are well-established in the literature, with female youth reporting greater dissatisfaction than males, both in cross-sectional examinations (e.g., Lawler & Nixon, 2011; Meland, Haugland, & Breidablik, 2007) and over the course of adolescence (e.g., Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Paxton, 2006; Gardner, Stark, Friedman, & Jackson, 2000; Holsen, Kraft, & Roysamb, 2001; Jones, 2004; Rauste-von Wright, 1989; Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999; von Soest & Wichstrom, 2009). Less is known, however, regarding the unique trajectories of female and male adolescents' body dissatisfaction development across adolescence into young adulthood.

Despite a growing body of work examining changes in body dissatisfaction among adolescents, a clear picture of the unique trajectories of female and male adolescents' body dissatisfaction over time has not yet emerged. Evidence largely has supported the notion that, among girls, body dissatisfaction increases through middle adolescence (Bearman, Presnell, Martinez, & Stice, 2006; Holsen et al., 2001; Gardner et al., 2000; Jones, 2004; Meland et al., 2007; Eisenberg et al., 2006; Rauste-von Wright, 1989; Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999; Tiggemann, 2005), with notable exceptions citing either no change (von Soest & Wichstrom, 2009) or decreases (Ohring, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002) over time. However, findings are more mixed regarding patterns of body image

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development across the transition to young adulthood, with studies yielding varying evidence of further increased dissatisfaction (e.g., Bearman et al., 2006; Gardner et al., 2000; Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999; Tiggemann, 2005), stable levels of dissatisfaction (von Soest & Wichstrom, 2009), or decreased dissatisfaction (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2006; Holsen et al., 2001; Rauste-von Wright, 1989) from middle adolescence to early young adulthood.

Among boys, disparate patterns of body image development are evident from early adolescence. Whereas results of some studies indicate a pattern of decreased body dissatisfaction over time (Holsen et al., 2001; Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999), others suggest no significant change (Bearman et al., 2006; Gardner et al., 2000; von Soest & Wichstrom, 2009), and still others point to increases in dissatisfaction from early to middle adolescence (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Rauste-von Wright, 1989) and to decreases in dissatisfaction later, during the transition to early young adulthood (Rauste-von Wright, 1989).

An important factor to consider in any examination of body image is BMI, as one's weight status provides a dynamic physical marker which an individual may use to form and develop self-appraisals over time. Whereas evidence seems to point to BMI as a consistent predictor of girls' body dissatisfaction (Barker & Galambos, 2003; Jones, 2004; Lawler & Nixon, 2011; Presnell, Bearman, & Stice, 2004; Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999; Tiggemann, 2005), results of several studies suggest that BMI also predicts boys' body dissatisfaction (Field, Carmargo, Taylor, Berkey, Roberts, & Colditz, 2001; Lawler & Nixon, 2011). However, in one longitudinal study of adolescent boys and girls, the BMI–body dissatisfaction relationship did not bear out among either group (Bearman et al., 2006).

One prior examination of changes in adolescents' body dissatisfaction was conducted over a 5-year period, utilizing the same data set as that being used in the current study, and was comprised of two cohorts of students in middle school and high school, respectively, at baseline. Results of that study revealed that body dissatisfaction tended to increase among participants, although some differences were noted across age transitions and gender (Eisenberg et al., 2006). This increase in dissatisfaction was most pronounced among younger males during the transition from early to middle adolescence, a period during which the ideal male body type shifts toward increased muscularity. Conversely, in the same study, body dissatisfaction among older adolescent females actually decreased slightly through adolescence (Eisenberg et al., 2006)—a finding which also may reflect a shift in the body type idealized at this transitional period, as prior research suggests (Cooley & Toray, 2001). It was concluded that the variation in body dissatisfaction observed at developmental transition periods within the sample illuminates opportunities for targeted prevention efforts that may be relevant at different stages of adolescence. The authors noted, however, that the inclusion of an additional point of assessment would provide a more nuanced exploration into the process of body dissatisfaction change. Thus, the current study builds upon this previous work to examine trajectories of adolescents' body dissatisfaction into young adulthood—10 years later.

Most longitudinal studies examining trends in body dissatisfaction have relied for the most part on predominantly White samples (Bearman et al., 2006; Gardner et al., 2000; Jones, 2004; Ohring et al., 2002; Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999; Tiggemann, 2005; von Soest & Wichstrom, 2009), and many either have not included the key transitional period that occurs as adolescents reach age 18 (e.g., Bearman et al., 2006; Holsen et al., 2001; Jones, 2004; Rauste-von Wright, 1989; Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999; Tiggemann, 2005) or have not included transitional periods at all (e.g., Gardner et al., 2000; Ohring et al., 2002). A clear understanding of the trajectories of body dissatisfaction among diverse female and male youth will inform prevention efforts aimed at intervening in these trajectories

and mitigating harmful outcomes and be suitable for more diverse populations than have been previously studied. Additionally, given the lack of clear evidence regarding the course of body dissatisfaction into and through young adulthood, further examination of key transitional periods across adolescence and emerging adulthood are needed to better inform intervention efforts. The present study, therefore, uses longitudinal data to examine changes in body dissatisfaction among diverse male and female adolescents at baseline and 10-year follow-up, spanning transitional periods between adolescence and young adulthood.

It is hypothesized that: (a) consistent with prior findings, body dissatisfaction will be higher overall among females than among males; (b) although evidence is somewhat mixed, body dissatisfaction will increase from adolescence to early young adulthood for females and males, leveling off as participants transition to adulthood, as suggested by the majority of prior findings; and (c) body dissatisfaction will be associated with BMI for females and males, such that increases in BMI over time will be associated with increases in body dissatisfaction. The present study addresses the need for clear evidence regarding the course of body dissatisfaction across key transitional periods into and through young adulthood.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Data for this analysis were drawn from Project EAT-III, the third wave of a 10-year longitudinal study designed to examine dietary intake, physical activity, weight control behaviors, weight status, and factors associated with these outcomes among young people. The analytic sample includes 1902 young adults who responded at all three time points. In Project EAT-I, middle school and high school students at 31 public schools in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area of Minnesota completed surveys and anthropometric measures during the 1998–1999 academic year (Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Hannan, & Croll, 2002; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Hannan, & Moe, 2002). Five years later (2003–2004), for Project EAT-II, original participants were mailed follow-up surveys to examine changes in their eating patterns, weight control behaviors, and weight status as they progressed through adolescence (Neumark-Sztainer, Wall, Eisenberg, Story, & Hannan, 2004; Neumark-Sztainer, Wall, et al., 2006). Project EAT-III was designed to follow up on participants again in 2008–2009 as they progressed from adolescence into young adulthood. The University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board Human Subjects Committee approved all protocols used in Project EAT at each of the three time points.

Of the original 4746 participants, 1304 (27.5%) were lost to follow-up for various reasons, primarily missing contact information at EAT-I ($n = 411$) and no address found at follow-up ($n = 712$). For Project EAT-III, letters providing the web address and a unique password for completing the online version of the Project EAT-III survey and a food frequency questionnaire (FFQ) were mailed to the remaining 3442 participants (Larson, Neumark-Sztainer, Harwood, Eisenberg, Wall, & Hannan, 2011).

A total of 2287 young adults completed Project EAT-III surveys that were determined valid and adequately complete for inclusion in analyses (via internal checking for unbelievable response patterns; consistency of responses for age, gender, and height; correction of ages that fell outside the expected range based on cohort assignment; and exclusion of surveys with fewer than 25% of presented items completed), representing 66.4% of participants who could be contacted (48.2% of the original school-based sample). There were 819 males (43.0%) and 1083 females (57.0%), for a total

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