Mirror, mirror on the wall: How women learn body dissatisfaction

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ABSTRACT
Extensive research indicates that exposure to media as well as pressure and modeling by sociocultural agents, such as peers and family, are predictive of the development of body image dissatisfaction (BID). This influence is mediated by social comparison and internalization of the thin ideal. In the current study we assessed comparisons between participants and other women with whom they were in close relationships, (e.g. mother, sister and close female friend), and hypothesized that these would influence women’s BID and drive-to-thinness. 283 women between the ages of 18–42 (mean = 25.04; SD = 3.53) sampled through social networking completed an online self-report which included the original Figure Rating Scale, which yielded self-ideal disparity, as well as a modified version comparing self to mother, self to sister closest-in-age, and self to best friend and then were asked to directly compare themselves to these women. In addition they completed the EDI-2’s drive-for-thinness and body dissatisfaction subscales, and reported on Body Mass Index (BMI). Results indicate that comparisons to mothers, sisters, and best friend, were all associated with self-ideal disparity. BMI only slightly mediated this effect. Comparison to sister and to best friend, but not to mother, influenced drive-for-thinness and body dissatisfaction. Positive correlations were found between direct and indirect comparisons to others. Comparison to best friend was the most influential on body ideal. We conclude that comparison to others in close proximity greatly influences women’s body ideal and may have a formative role in the development of women’s body dissatisfaction. While women cannot choose their mother and sister closest in age, they do choose their best friend; and it is interesting that the comparison to the best friend is so influential.

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1. Introduction
Exposure to media and social comparisons has been found to be associated with body image dissatisfaction (BID), especially in women. Western culture places a growing emphasis on an ultra-thin body ideal, and this is reflected in the media (Anschutz, Engels, & Van Strien, 2008; Borzekowski, Robinson, & Killen, 2000; Calado, Lameiras, Sepulveda, Rodriguez, & Carrera, 2011; Carlson Jones, 2001; Dittmar & Howard, 2004). Research has found associations between exposure to media and BID, even in very young girls (Anschutz & Engels, 2010; Anschutz, Engels, & Van Strien, 2012; Anschutz, Spruijt-Metz, Van Strien, & Engels, 2011; Blowers, Loxton, Grady-Flesser, Occhipinti, & Dawe, 2003; Calado et al., 2011). Anschutz and Engels (2010), for example, found that girls as young as 11–12 years old compared their body image unfavorably to those viewed on TV.

However, in an extensive review of the influence of the media on body dissatisfaction, Ferguson, Winegard, and Winegard (2011) concluded that media exposure in itself is not a main contributor to the internalization of the thin ideal. They argue that meta-analyses reveal only modest effect sizes and that this leaves much room to explore other reasons for BID in young girls and women (Ferguson, 2009; Ferguson et al., 2011). Media exposure, therefore, should be considered only as one of many contributing risk factors.

Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) contends that women in Western culture are constantly objectified, and that their body is used by others as a way of assessing their personal worth. Through socialization, women internalize that their self-worth is largely based on the way other people view them, and this, in turn, leads to their own continuous sub-conscious social comparisons of their body image to others. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) also bring ample evidence to support their claim that this may be one of the major causes for the rise of eating disorders in the past two decades, and the fact that it is a disorder most commonly found in women. Much research since then has continued to find support for objectification theory as a predictor of disordered eating (Lindner, Tantleff-Dunn, & Jentsch, 2012; Tylka & Hill, 2004).

Although much has been said on the influence of media on internalization of the thin-body image ideal, less is known of peer and family influences. Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory proposes that humans seek out objective standards to assess their own personal worth and subjective status. When objective standards cannot be found, social comparison, (i.e. comparison to relevant others) will be
Young women’s BMI may exert an influence of its own on drive for thinness and evaluation of body image. In a short longitudinal study, Clark and Tiggemann (2008) found that preadolescent girls with a higher BMI reported more body dissatisfaction and a higher drive for thinness one year later, even after taking into account these measures at outset. They also found that girls with a higher BMI’s were prone to more social comparison, less body satisfaction, and a higher drive for thinness. Clark and Tiggemann (2008) study assessed social comparison by girl’s reports on appearance–conversations with peers and not on direct subjective comparisons (i.e. asking the girl if she thinks she’s fatter than her friends). Although comparisons can be made on many different aspects of appearance, previous studies focus on extreme and unrealistic thinness as they seem to be a central drive of body dissatisfaction. This is why we chose to focus on thinness as a major aspect of BID in this paper.

In this study we examine women’s comparison of body image with those of females close to them and the impact of this comparison on their BID, drive for thinness and the disparity of Self-Ideal body image. We also examine the difference between direct and indirect comparisons. In addition we examine the hypothesis that arises from Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory that women will choose comparison figures that enhance their self-esteem. For this to be supported in the current study more than half the women should compare themselves to a best friend that they perceive to be less thin than their own body image. We focus on the best friend since participants cannot choose their mother, and some may have only one sister; but best friends are surely a choice an adult woman can make.

We hypothesized, following Festinger, that women would feel that their mother/sister/friend were heavier than themselves so as to maintain a positive self image.

We asked women to rate their perception of their own body and then to rate their perception of ideal body image, their mother’s body shape, their sister closest-in-age body shape, and their closest female friend’s body. This comparison is indirect, as women were not asked to compare themselves to these significant women, simply to rate them, each on a separate scale. We then asked these same women directly to compare their own body with that of their mother, sister-closest-in-age, and closest female friend. We hypothesized that:

1. Women would choose comparison figures heavier than themselves (both sisters and best-friends) in order to maintain positive self-esteem.

2. Indirect and direct comparisons would be correlated. 3. Unfavorable comparisons (i.e. feeling that others are thinner than oneself) would be associated with greater self-ideal disparity, higher body dissatisfaction, and more drive to thinness. 4. Indirect comparisons would be more powerful than direct comparisons when predicting drive to thinness and body dissatisfaction.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

All women self-reported on an online questionnaire. Participants were recruited through social networking using a “snowball” procedure. Personal contacts (i.e. friends, family members, other researchers and students) were asked to volunteer and were also requested to send the study to other female friends and family members. Only women who had sisters were included in the final analysis. In total, 283 Israeli women between the ages of 18–42 (mean = 25.04; SD = 3.53) completed Hebrew online self-reports, including the Figure Rating Scale (FRS), the Eating Disorder Inventory-2’s (EDI-2) Drive for Thinness and Body Dissatisfaction subscales, and self reported BMI. About half (50.5%) of our participants were high school graduates, 34.2% had a college degree, and the rest had a graduate degree. Overall this was a representative of middle class women from all parts of Israel, all of whom had internet access.
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