

Original Article

Intrasexual competition and eating restriction in heterosexual and homosexual individuals[☆]

Norman P. Li^{a,b,*}, April R. Smith^c, Vldas Griskevicius^d, Margaret J. Cason^a, Angela Bryan^e

^aUniversity of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA

^bSingapore Management University, Singapore

^cFlorida State University, Tallahassee, FL, USA

^dUniversity of Minnesota, Twin Cities, MN, USA

^eUniversity of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM, USA

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Abstract

Restrictive eating attitudes and behaviors have been hypothesized to be related to processes of intrasexual competition. According to this perspective, within-sex competition for status serves the adaptive purpose of attracting mates. As such, status competition salience may lead to concerns of mating desirability. For heterosexual women and gay men, such concerns revolve around appearing youthful and, thus, thinner. Following this logic, we examined how exposure to high-status and competitive (but not thin or highly attractive) same-sex individuals would influence body image and eating attitudes in heterosexual and in gay/lesbian individuals. Results indicated that for heterosexuals, intrasexual competition cues led to greater body image dissatisfaction and more restrictive eating attitudes for women, but not for men. In contrast, for homosexual individuals, intrasexual competition cues led to worse body image and eating attitudes for gay men, but not for lesbian women. These findings support the idea that the ultimate explanation for eating disorders is related to intrasexual competition. © 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Approximately 11 million Americans suffer from an eating disorder such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa (National Eating Disorders Association, 2006). Anorexia nervosa is the deadliest psychological illness, resulting in a 10% death rate (e.g., Birmingham, Su, Hlynsky, Goldner & Goa, 2005). Many more people simply want to be thin and feel averse toward eating. Indeed, 80% of women report being dissatisfied with their body shape (Smolak, 1996). Such dissatisfaction tends to be firmly established in adolescence (e.g., Vohs, Heatherton & Herrin, 2001), whereby half of teenage girls skip meals, vomit or engage in other extreme weight control practices (Neumark-

Sztainer, 2005). From an evolutionary perspective, self-destructive eating behaviors seem paradoxical. Voluntarily starving or purging food would generally not have been favored by natural selection. Yet, the prevalence of eating disorders suggests that an adaptive mechanism might underlie this phenomenon.

We examined the idea that eating restriction in pursuit of thinness may be linked to intrasexual competition for status and, ultimately, for mates (Abed, 1998; Faer, Hendriks, Abed & Figueredo, 2005). Specifically, eating restriction may result from perpetual competition with same-sex individuals. Although the nature of such competition is adaptive, the underlying mechanisms may be excessively triggered by abundant competitive stimuli in the modern world.

1.1. The roots of eating restriction

In their review of attitudes toward female body fat, Anderson, Crawford, Nadeau and Lindberg (1992) noted the cross-cultural variability in such attitudes. Thinness in

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* Corresponding author. School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University, 90 Stamford Road, Level 4, Singapore 178903.

E-mail address: normanli@smu.edu.sg (N.P. Li).

females, as well as both major forms of eating pathologies (anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa), is more prevalent in Western vs. non-Western (e.g., Makino, Tsuboi & Dennerstein, 2002) and in industrialized vs. nonindustrialized nations (e.g., Choudry & Mumford, 1992). Accordingly, many researchers have attributed eating restriction and related issues to cultural norms for female thinness (e.g., Polivy, Garner & Garfinkel, 1986), made salient through media (e.g., Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Indeed, viewing thin vs. nonthin magazine models results in more negative mood, body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptoms among Western women (Hawkins, Richards, Granley & Stein, 2004). Similarly, viewing TV commercials (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995) or music videos (Tiggemann & Slater, 2004) highlighting actresses' appearances negatively impacts women's body image satisfaction. Such studies, however, have rarely considered where the cultural preferences originated and why media images are so readily processed (Anderson et al., 1992).

Searching for more ultimate explanations, some researchers have proposed evolutionary hypotheses for restrictive eating and the desire for thinness (see Anderson et al., 1992). One promising hypothesis concerns adaptive reproductive suppression. That is, when female mammals face ecological conditions unfavorable for rearing offspring, they may temporarily halt fertility through the restriction of eating, which causes body fat to drop below the minimal level needed for ovulation (Surbey, 1987; Voland & Voland, 1989; Wasser & Barash, 1983). For adolescent girls and women, whether or not ovulation occurs may be sensitive to small changes in weight if their body fat composition is near the critical level (Frisch, 1990). As such, in environments where social support is variable, it may be adaptive to generally be slender and to be especially averse to weight gain and eating when social support for childrearing is lacking (Anderson et al., 1992).

Support for this hypothesis has been found through studies linking social conditions and relevant attitudes. For example, perceived lack of social support (Juda, Campbell & Crawford, 2004) and local norms valuing women in the workforce (Anderson et al., 1992) are associated with dieting and negative attitudes toward female body fat. Furthermore, Salmon, Crawford, Dane & Zuberbier (2008) found that merely imagining oneself in various stressful situations can induce greater body dissatisfaction and restrictive eating attitudes in women. Although it is a plausible ultimate explanation, reproductive suppression tends to be limited to explaining symptoms of anorexia nervosa and does not address the development of similarly negative eating attitudes and behaviors in men. Indeed, although eating disorders are typically associated with women, up to 15% of individuals with eating disorders are men (Carlat and Camargo, 1991).

A more general ultimate explanation that may also apply to eating restriction, as well as a wider range of disordered eating behaviors, is that it is rooted in adaptive mechanisms

for intrasexual competition. Across species, a primary function of competing with members of one's own sex is to attract viable mates (Darwin, 1871). Indeed, for human males and females, tactics for competing intrasexually for status are essentially mate attraction tactics (Buss, 1988; Walters & Crawford, 1994). Because men value cues of youth and fertility in their mates (Symons, 1979), women compete intrasexually on physical attractiveness for status. The dimensions that are specifically valued may depend on local social input. In Western societies, people tend to gain weight with age as metabolic rates and physical activity decrease (e.g., Cohen, 1989; Keel, Baxter, Heatherton & Joiner, 2007) and female thinness tends to be equated with youth and status (Sobal & Stunkard, 1989). Thus, abundant media images of thin females may be overactivating an otherwise adaptive mechanism to compete against one's actual peers on appearance.

To date, many studies have demonstrated the negative effects of media-portrayed thinness and, more generally, physical attractiveness on body image and eating attitudes. Most of these studies posit that the desire for thinness is driven by modeling and social norms, whereby exposure to glamorous images of attractive, thin women leads young women to imitate such models. However, an intrasexual competition model suggests that a wider range of stimuli should be capable of triggering a desire for thinness and, thus, restrictive eating. That is, if intrasexual competition for status ultimately serves the adaptive purpose of attracting mates, then a general activation of intrasexual competition motives — even when cues related to appearance, attraction or mating are absent — may be enough to trigger mating desirability concerns. For women, such concerns are oriented around appearing more youthful and fertile (i.e., nubile). In contrast, women tend not to be romantically interested in men who are very young (Kenrick & Keefe, 1992). Thus, the triggering of mating desirability through intrasexual competition would be expected to bring about desires for thinness and eating restriction in women, but not in men.

1.2. *Intrasexual competition and sexual orientation*

Although eating restriction should be a female — but not a male — response to intrasexual competition cues, the opposite may apply for homosexual individuals. Gay men, but not lesbian women, especially value physical attractiveness (Bailey et al., 1994) and youth (Kenrick, Keefe, Bryan, Barr & Brown, 1995) in their romantic partners. Compared with heterosexual men, gay men report greater body dissatisfaction (e.g., Beren, Hayden, Wilfley & Grilo, 1996) and disordered eating tendencies (Herzog et al., 1984; Yager, Kurtzman, Landsverk & Weismeier, 1988). In contrast, lesbian women score lower than or equal to heterosexual women on such measures (e.g., Stiegel-Moore, Tucker & Hsu, 1990). If the intrasexual competition perspective is correct, then gay men — but not lesbian women — should also respond to intrasexual competition

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