



Dieting behaviors, body shape perceptions, and body satisfaction: Cross-cultural differences in Argentinean and Swedish 13-year-olds

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Received 13 October 2006; received in revised form 5 February 2007; accepted 5 March 2007

Abstract

This exploratory study represents a cross-cultural effort to examine differences in dieting practices and weight loss attempts, perceived body shape, and body satisfaction between young Argentinean and Swedish adolescents. The study group consisted of 358 Argentinean (193 girls, 165 boys) and 874 Swedish (474 girls, 400 boys) 13-year-olds. A main finding was that Argentinean and Swedish adolescents did not differ on body satisfaction, although girls in both countries displayed greater body dissatisfaction than did boys. Dieting and weight loss attempts were more prevalent among the Argentinean adolescents, especially among girls, and did not appear to depend on overweight or perception of body shape. The samples also differed in their perceptions of body shape and the effect those perceptions had on their body satisfaction, with Swedish adolescents suffering more from negative body shape perceptions.

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Keywords: Body satisfaction; Cross-cultural; Dieting; Body shape perception; 13-year-olds

Introduction

Subjective experiences of the body and its appearance are very important aspects of psychological and interpersonal development in adolescence (Levine & Smolak, 2002). A range of social, cognitive, and physical changes occur during this period in life (Steinberg, 1999), bringing most adolescents to view themselves in new and different ways. Unfortunately, this is a critical time in terms of bodily satisfaction with many adolescents experiencing increasing levels of body concern and dissatisfaction (Alsaker, 1996; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Paxton, 2006; Lunde,

Frisé, & Hwang, 2007). The almost normative prevalence of body dissatisfaction (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985), along with the intimate ties between body dissatisfaction and unhealthy dieting practices, depression, and eating disorders (Keel, Fulkerson, & Leon, 1997; Levine & Smolak, 2002; Stice, Hayward, Cameron, Killen, & Taylor, 2000), usually motivate the psychological study of these matters. Consequently, adolescents' body concerns are acknowledged as an important issue and there is now a vast range of studies attempting to answer a number of different questions related to body dissatisfaction.

However, there is an apparent dearth when it comes to cross-cultural studies. This was recognized by Cash and Pruzinsky (2002) in a chapter discussing future challenges for body image research. In this chapter, they stated that “comparative cross-cultural studies of body image are crucial to enhance our understanding of the

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diversity of body images and the influence of culture on body image development, dysfunction, and change” (p. 513). Culture is a broad and complex term, encompassing a multidimensional social context that includes shared institutions, values, norms, and language, and that can be “translated into proximal influences that directly influence development and behavior” (Smolak & Striegel-Moore, 2002, p. 112). Consequently, socio-cultural theorists propose that body image problems stem from messages conveyed by various forces comprising the individual’s cultural milieu (e.g., Morrison, Kalin, & Morrison, 2004). McArthur, Holbert, and Peña (2005) recently noted that although research from industrialized and developing societies shows that adolescents are vulnerable to body image problems, there is a paucity of studies from Latin American countries. Hence, the objective of the present research is to explore cross-cultural differences in body satisfaction between Argentinean and Swedish adolescents.

We will now turn to the rationale underlying the sample selection for this research. During recent years, the living standard in South America has increased, with Argentina now being one of the most well developed countries in the South American part of the world (United Nations Development Programme, 2006). Indeed, pressures to be slim have been shown to increase with socio-economic status (SES) in industrialized countries (Furnham & Alibhai, 1983), and as populations in developing nations become more affluent it is plausible that they become more at risk of body dissatisfaction. In line with this notion, Forman and Morello (2003) argue that the thin beauty ideal has become increasingly popular in Argentina, and Rivarola (2003) suggest that Argentinean media is constantly associating thinness with success and power. In addition, Meehan and Katzman (2001) report that cosmetic surgery has become one of the most profitable medical specialties in Argentina. According to Romer (1996; referred to in Meehan & Katzman, 2001), 45% of Argentinean females and 19% of Argentinean males would undergo a cosmetic surgery procedure to improve their physical appearance. Despite of these trends, we are only aware of two studies examining body satisfaction among Argentinean adolescents (Forman & Morello, 2003; McArthur et al., 2005).

Forman and Morello (2003) examined weight concerns and perceived difficulty in quitting smoking among Argentinean adolescents. In terms of weight concerns, they demonstrated that these concerns (perceived fatness, drive for thinness, and frequent dieting) were more common among Argentinean females than

among males, thus congruent with sex differences evident in populations from industrialized countries. McArthur et al. (2005) examined attitudinal and perceptual body image among 1272 adolescents from six cities in Latin America (Buenos Aires in Argentina, Guatemala City in Guatemala, Havana in Cuba, Lima in Peru, Panama City in Panama, and Santiago in Chile). Almost 40% of the normal-weight adolescents from all cities indicated a preference to be thinner, although a large proportion of the normal-weight adolescents already perceived themselves as thin. Congruent with the findings of Forman and Morello (2003) on sex differences, females in all cities except Havana had stronger desires to be thinner than had boys. This sex difference was most obvious in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where 62% of the females, but only 28% of the males, would prefer to be thinner. Additionally, the preference of being thinner was apparent in both lower and higher SES in Buenos Aires, whereas it was typically evident only among members with higher SES in the other cities. These findings, hence, confirm that bodily concern and dissatisfaction may be rather widespread problems among young Argentineans, especially among girls, but as aforementioned there is a paucity of studies from this area of the world.

As in Argentina, there are relatively few studies of Swedish adolescents’ body satisfaction (but see Edlund, Halvarsson, & Sjöden, 1996; Halvarsson, Lunner, Westerberg, Anteson, & Sjöden, 2002; Lunde et al., 2007). Reports of body dissatisfaction among Swedish adolescents are typically in unanimity with rates of body dissatisfaction reported in studies performed in other industrialized countries. Sweden is further known for being a society of dual breadwinners (Ellingsaeter, 1998), whereas the Argentinean society has been described in terms of a “machismo-culture” (Meehan & Katzman, 2001, p. 158). If these labels are fairly accurate, one may speculate whether Swedish and Argentinean youngsters’ attitudes toward some matters differ, for instance in the way they view their appearance. To attempt to explore cross-cultural differences in body satisfaction between Swedish and Argentinean adolescents, hence, appeared a fruitful objective.

Finally, male populations are generally underrepresented in body satisfaction research, and cross-cultural research in this area is not an exception to this problem. The majority of cross-cultural studies that we were able to find concentrated on older female adolescents or young female adults (e.g., Gupta, Chaturvedi, Chandarana, & Johnson, 2001; Mukai, Kambara, & Sasaki, 1998; Sheffield, Tse, & Sofronoff, 2005; Tiggemann,

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