



Body image avoidance behaviors in adolescence: A multilevel analysis of contextual effects associated with the physical education class



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This paper studied the effects of the Physical Education (PE) class context on adolescent body avoidance behaviors.

Design: Cross-sectional study.

Methods: A sample of adolescents ($n = 1792$) completed questionnaires measuring body size dissatisfaction, body image avoidance behaviors and physical activity levels. Their PE teachers ($n = 81$) completed questionnaires of body size dissatisfaction, attitudes toward obesity and teaching characteristics, including questions regarding teaching style, experience and training. Participants' height and weight were measured. Contextual effects –PE teachers' and peers' influence–were analyzed using multilevel methods.

Results: Multilevel regression showed that the stronger the desire for thinness of PE classmates the more frequent the body avoidance behaviors of the adolescents. We also found an inverse relationship of the teachers' teaching experience and academic training with students' avoidance behaviors.

Conclusions: The PE teacher and PE classmates exercise a degree of influence on some of the behavioral manifestations of body image problems, even when the effects of the individual characteristics of the adolescents are controlled. However, the influence of this educational context has limited predictive capacity and should be studied together with other social contexts –friends and family–in future research.

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Introduction

The physical changes associated with the onset of puberty make adolescence a particularly vulnerable period for the development of body image problems (Markey, 2010). The increase in body fat, more intense in girls, or acne in both sexes, are factors which tend to distance adolescents from the socially transmitted ideal of beauty (Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005; Stice, 2003). It comes as no surprise that the internalization of these ideals may generate body image disorders in some adolescents (Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004).

To combat the unease produced by the negative feelings and evaluations of their own bodies, adolescents tend to develop avoidance behaviors in situations that activate those negative evaluations (Rosen, Srebnik, Saltzberg, & Wendt, 1991). Amongst

other avoidance behaviors, it is habitual for bodily dissatisfied adolescents to avoid the use of tight clothing, social meetings, intimate contact or large meals. These avoidance behaviors tend to be accompanied by other repetitive behaviors to check their appearance, such as weighing themselves or looking at themselves in the mirror frequently.

Since avoidance behaviors are typical behavioral manifestations of body image problems, their frequency may be seen as an indicator of the severity of these problems. In fact, several studies have shown that these avoidance behaviors are significant predictors of extreme strategies of body change and of the psychological symptoms associated with body image disorders (Bamford, Attoe, Mountford, Morgan, & Sly, 2014; Reas, Grilo, Masheb, & Wilson, 2005). Although few studies have dealt with adolescents, Maiano, Morin, Monthuy-Blanc, and Garbarino (2009) found a moderate relation between risky eating behaviors and avoidance behaviors in a sample of French adolescents.

Avoidance behaviors are not just a simple manifestation of body dissatisfaction, they also seem to play an important role in maintaining body image disorders (Reas & Grilo, 2004), hampering the

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rejection of non-realistic beliefs about appearance and the practice of positive coping strategies. Thus, for example, the avoidance of social situations which emphasize appearance may contribute to encouraging isolation and the feeling of being strange or different (Reas & Grilo, 2004). Due to the potential maladaptive nature of body avoidance behaviors, the reduction of their frequency tends to be one of the focuses of body image disorder treatments, particularly from a cognitive-behavioral orientation (Paxton & McLean, 2010).

Contextual influences on body image

From early childhood, body image is molded by the intercourse between personal traits and socially transmitted ideas of beauty (Ambrosi-Randic, 2000; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006). With the onset of adolescence, the culture of appearance becomes a fundamental element in the internalization of ideals of beauty (Jones et al., 2004). According to the tripartite model (van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Coovert, 2002), the main agents of this sociocultural influence are family, friends and the media. Assuming the importance of these influences there are other agents of socialization which may have effects on the body image of adolescents. Bearing in mind that adolescents spend most of the day at school, it seems very likely that their behaviors will be influenced by the teachers and peers with whom they interact daily. Our study aims to compensate for the lack of research into the influence of these educational stakeholders on the body image of adolescents.

Specifically, physical education classes represent one of the school contexts where there is a greater probability of suffering bullying attitudes and situations related to appearance. It is usual, for example, for overweight adolescents, particularly for girls, to receive critical or condescending comments about their weight while taking part in physical or sporting activities (Faith, Leone, Ayers, Heo & Pietrobelli, 2002). In interviews with 30 obese pre-adolescents, Fox and Edmunds (2000) discovered that many of the jibes and derogatory comments made about them stemmed from their performance in PE classes. This was one of the reasons they gave for saying that they did not like physical education classes, but it was not the only one. They also expressed their discontent at having to 'get changed in front of their peers' or at 'having to wear a uniform', without being able to avoid exposing their body to the others.

Physical appearance also seems to affect how students are treated by their PE teachers. The students' weight, for example, conditions the expectations that teachers have about their pupils (Peterson, Puhl, & Luedicke, 2012a). Greenleaf and Weiller (2005) found that PE teachers had lower expectations about the physical, cognitive and social skills of overweight pupils. As a result, these pupils tend to receive fewer instructions and those they do receive are of worse quality, which seems likely to affect their performance and motivation (Martinek, 1997). In most cases, this discrimination toward overweight adolescents does not have an objective foundation and tends to be the expression of particularly negative attitudes toward obesity. Greenleaf and Weiller (2005) found that PE teachers had strongly stereotyped beliefs toward obesity. Other works have found that students studying to become PE teachers have more negative attitudes toward obesity than students of other fields (Gago, Tornero, Carmona, & Sierra, 2012; O'Brien, Hunter, & Banks, 2007). In turn, PE teachers tend to be under great pressure to be thin and physically fit (Yager & O'Dea, 2005). For this reason, it is no surprise that they themselves develop body image problems and inappropriate eating behaviors (O'Dea & Abraham, 2001).

In spite of these potential body image problems, PE teachers can also act as a protective factor against students' body image

concerns. Specifically, in regard to teaching methods, previous research suggests that student-centered methods are better suited for promoting positive body image than traditional teacher-centered methods (Crombie, Brunet, & Sabiston, 2011; O'Dea & Abraham, 2000). O'Dea and Abraham, for example, tested a student-centered educational program based on the use of cooperative and interactive teaching methods. Although the intervention was primarily aimed at enhancing self-esteem, it also improved significantly body satisfaction in a sample of Australian male and female adolescents. Norwood, Murray, Nolan, and Bowker (2011) found similar results using a comparable program in a sample of Canadian preadolescents, showing the usefulness of these student-centered teaching strategies in the promotion of positive body image.

Self-presentational processes in the PE context

Self-presentation refers to the processes by which people monitor and control how they are perceived by others (Schlenker, 1980). According to the two-component model of impression management (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), self-presentation involves two discrete processes: impression motivation and impression construction. Because the impressions we make on others have important consequences, self-presentational motives arise in many different social contexts and situations (impression motivation). When we are motivated to create an impression, self-presentation tactics are put into action by undertaking or avoiding certain behaviors (impression construction).

Given the crucial role of body image during adolescence, concerns related to physical appearance become one of the main adolescents' self-presentational motives. Some adolescents are quite concerned about how their peers evaluate their physique and may become anxious. Social Physique Anxiety (SPA) is the anxiety experienced in response to the real or imagined evaluation of one's body by others (Hart, Leary, & Rejeski, 1989). The two-component model states that SPA and other self-presentational processes are context-dependent (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Martin Ginis, Murru, Conlin, & Strong, 2011). Some physical —e.g., mirrors— or psychological —e.g., presence of scrutinizing others— characteristics of the context may strengthen adolescents' vulnerability to SPA and are likely to foster appearance-related self-presentational concerns (Hausenblas, Brewer, & Van Raalte, 2004).

Physical Education is a context that places a strong emphasis on the physique and provides ample opportunities to judge the appearance of one's body (Cox, Ullrich-French, Madonia, & Witty, 2011). A few studies have shown that some contextual characteristics of the PE setting can have an impact on self-presentational concerns. Koca and Asci (2006), for instance, performed a study on the effects of gender composition of PE classes in a sample of Turkish adolescents and found that most of the females who were high in SPA preferred a same-sex PE setting. Cox et al., on the other hand, studied the role of perceived teacher support and peer acceptance in predicting SPA in the PE environment. They concluded that perceived peer acceptance was a significant predictor of SPA in PE, but not perceived teacher support.

In order to cope with SPA in anxiety-provoking situations, adolescents implement a great variety of self-presentational strategies (Sabiston, Sedgwick, Crocker, Kowalski & Mack, 2007). However, behavioral avoidance seems to play a paramount role amongst these coping strategies (Kowalski, Mack, Crocker, Niefer, & Fleming, 2006; Sabiston et al., 2007). Researchers have shown that avoidance coping behaviors are also context dependent. For example, some evidence exists that overweight children may avoid taking part in physical education classes or sports when suffering a context of bullying (Faith et al., 2002). In a scenario study about

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