



A prospective study on the impact of peer and parental pressure on body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls and boys

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ABSTRACT

The current study explores the role of appearance-related social pressure regarding changes in body image in adolescent girls ($n=236$) and boys ($n=193$) over a 1-year-period. High school students aged 11–16 completed measures of body dissatisfaction (i.e., weight and muscle concerns) and appearance-related social pressure from peers and parents. Three aspects proved to be particularly crucial: Parental encouragement to control weight and shape was a strong predictor of weight concerns in boys and girls alike; influences of friends affected gender-specific body image concerns by leading to weight concerns in girls and muscle concerns in boys; finally appearance-based exclusion was a predictor of weight concerns in boys. The findings provide longitudinal evidence for the crucial impact of appearance-related social pressure and suggest that a detailed assessment of different types of social impacts can identify concrete targets for effective prevention and therapy for weight-related problems among adolescents.

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Introduction

Body dissatisfaction is highly prevalent among adolescents. Some authors even refer to it as a normative occurrence among adolescent girls (e.g., Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984) and an increased number of studies have revealed that boys are similarly affected (Jones & Crawford, 2005; Ricciardelli, McCabe, & Banfield, 2000). However, because male and female body ideals differ, body dissatisfaction for girls and boys differs as well. Whereas adolescent girls usually wish to be thinner (Smolak, 2004), it is estimated that one-third of adolescent boys desire a thinner, and another third a larger and more muscular body size (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001; McCreary & Sasse, 2000). Because body dissatisfaction is one of the main risk factors for health-endangering body change strategies (e.g., eating disorders or the use of steroids) further knowledge is needed about the causes of a negative body image. Although ideals are gender-specific, risk factors leading to pronounced appearance orientation and body dissatisfaction seem to be comparable for girls and boys (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; Presnell, Bearman, & Stice, 2004).

Social influences have proven to be particularly relevant in this process (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; Stice, 1994), and their impact on the development of body image concerns has been verified in

many cross-sectional studies and in a few prospective and experimental investigations. Examining the research on social pressure more closely, one could find evidence (a) for the impact of certain persons as well as (b) for different forms of appearance-related social pressure.

Thus, research reveals that adolescents who grow up in an appearance-focused environment are more concerned with their appearance (Jones & Crawford, 2006; Kluck, 2010). Findings further suggest that peers and parents – who are closest to the adolescent – are mainly relevant in promoting beauty ideals and appearance-related attitudes. In different studies Jones and Crawford (Jones, 2004; Jones & Crawford, 2005, 2006) point to the crucial role of the peer appearance culture. In particular, friends seem to be of high relevance (e.g., Jones, 2004; Paxton, Schultz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999). Different investigations have explored the parental impact. Research initially focused on the impact of maternal body image on their daughters (e.g., Benedikt, Wertheim, & Love, 1998; Pike & Rodin, 1991). However, the implicit assumption that mothers mainly influence their daughters whereas fathers have an impact on the body image of their sons could not be affirmed. In fact, the findings indicate that both parents have an impact on their daughter's and son's body image (e.g., Agras, Bryson, Hammer, & Kraemer, 2007; Field, Camargo, Taylor, Berkey, Roberts, & Colditz, 2001; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001; Ricciardelli et al., 2000; Rodgers, Faure, & Chabrol, 2009).

Furthermore, studies have found evidence for the impact of different forms of social pressure. A large body of literature has investigated the effects of *teasing* or negative verbal commentary from peers and parents and found strong evidence for negative

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consequences such as impaired self-esteem, body dissatisfaction or disordered eating. Although studies have shown that high-average and overweight adolescents are more often faced with teasing and suffer more from it, comparable consequences could also be found among non-overweight adolescents (e.g., Hayden-Wade, Stein, Ghaderi, Saelens, Zabinski, & Wilfley, 2005; Thompson, Shroff, Herbozo, Cafri, Rodriguez, & Rodriguez, 2007). Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, Haines, and Wall (2006) also showed that the impact of teasing experiences can last over years. A recent systematic meta-analysis has summarized the findings on teasing of the last 18 years (Menzel, Schaefer, Burke, Mayhew, Brannick, & Thompson, 2010) and has revealed that a moderate positive association between body dissatisfaction and teasing can be considered as well established. Interestingly, the impact is comparable whether weight teasing or general appearance teasing was considered. Moreover, Menzel et al. (2010) found a stronger impact on female compared to male participants but unfortunately they have only focused on body dissatisfaction in general and did not distinguish between weight and muscularity concerns. Hence, minor effects among male samples might be a result of inadequate assessment of body dissatisfaction. Unfortunately, many studies compounded sources of teasing (e.g., peers and parents), but if considered separately, teasing by peers was more prevalent (Helfert & Warschburger, 2011; Neumark-Sztainer, Falkner, Story, Perry, Hannan, & Mulert, 2002).

Particularly parents often deliver appearance-related messages that are intended to be encouraging but in fact can harm the body esteem of an adolescent (e.g., “Are you sure you want to eat more?” or “You’d better watch over what you eat for a while!”). Only a few cross-sectional studies have explored this aspect and found *parental encouragement* to diet to be associated with body dissatisfaction in girls and boys (Benedikt et al., 1998; Wertheim, Martin, Prior, Sanson, & Smart, 2002). In a recent study of retrospective parental influences on the body image and eating patterns of young women (Kluck, 2010) parental encouragement to control weight and size has even been revealed as the strongest predictor of body dissatisfaction. In a previous study, we found evidence that parental encouragement to control weight and shape is the most prevalent aspect of parental pressure perceived by girls and boys (Helfert & Warschburger, 2011). Until now, longitudinal evidence has been lacking.

Another aspect of social pressure is *exclusion* from social networks and activities because of one’s appearance. This phenomenon has mainly been investigated in the field of social marginalization of overweight individuals (e.g., Strauss & Pollack, 2003). Within normal weight adolescent samples, if not exclusion per se, then the fear of being excluded – often called appearance-based acceptance or likeability – has been explored. While in a cross-sectional study Oliver and Thelen (1996) found appearance-based peer acceptance to be the major predictor of body image concerns in girls and boys, prospective research could only verify this impact on girls (Jones, 2004).

The aspects of pressure just described are forms that directly target a certain person because of his or her appearance. Apart from that, there are forms of pressure that do not directly refer to a certain person but take effect more subtly via vicarious learning or role modeling (e.g., fat talk, appearance norms). Appearance norms and attitudes of significant others can form adolescents’ body image. If the social environment sets great value on appearance or promotes a certain beauty ideal, adolescents are more likely to adopt appearance standards (e.g., Jones & Crawford, 2006; Kluck, 2010). The standards and attitudes are either transmitted via appearance conversations or via behavior modeling.

The impact of *appearance conversations* among girls is well established. In the prospective study of Jones (2004) appearance conversations with friends led to elevated social comparison which

in turn predicted body dissatisfaction in girls one year later. Moreover, experimental studies investigating the effects of “fat talk” among females found a significant decrease in body dissatisfaction in subjects after watching other females complaining about their weight (e.g., Shomaker & Furman, 2007; Stice, Maxfield, & Wells, 2003). Concerning boys, less research has been performed. Jones (2004) did not find an impact on boys, which could be due to the use of a measure that mainly seems to assess concerns with too much weight. But cross-sectional research that considered muscularity concerns verified the impact of appearance conversation (so-called “muscle-talk”) on body image for boys also (e.g., Jones & Crawford, 2005; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). However, this finding needs confirmation within a longitudinal study.

Finally, *modeling* processes affect body image and body change behavior. Cross-sectional research found evidence that mainly same-gender friends as well as mothers and (especially for boys) fathers are likely to serve as role models (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; Paxton et al., 1999; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). Regarding parental modeling, longitudinal studies do not come to consistent findings (Field et al., 2001; Paxton, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006), which might result from varying follow-up periods or the different aspects of social pressure considered in these studies. However, in the study of Paxton et al. (2006) friend dieting was a significant predictor of body dissatisfaction in young adolescent girls in a five-year period. The fact that no effect could be found among boys might be due to the neglect of suitable male modeling behavior, e.g., exercising or muscle building behavior.

Although many studies have investigated links between social pressure and body dissatisfaction and have provided important findings, most of the studies investigated only one aspect of social pressure, either the impact of certain persons (e.g., parents, peers) or certain types of social pressure (e.g., teasing, fat talk) on body dissatisfaction. A few studies considered different sources of social pressure, but therefore had to accept limited measurements of pressures, sometimes with single items (e.g., Presnell et al., 2004; Stice & Whitenton, 2002; van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Coovert, 2002). Studies that explore various types of social pressure coming from peers and parents alike are lacking. Consequently, the entire impact of social influences might be underestimated, and the relevance of single aspects of social pressure cannot be compared. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the impact of various types of appearance-related social pressure coming from peers and parents on body dissatisfaction during adolescence.

As a review of published studies reveals, findings on body concerns among boys are few and often controversial. A possible reason is that studies did not always consider that issues and instruments suitable for girls are not necessarily transferable to boys. Body image research reveals that it is necessary to consider weight and muscle concerns among boys, otherwise crucial social impacts might be overlooked or their impact might be underestimated. To consider gender-specific aspects of body image concerns, we investigated the impact of appearance-related social pressure for girls and boys separately and focus on weight concerns among girls and both weight and muscle concerns among boys.

Because longitudinal findings are needed to establish the role of social pressure as a risk factor in the development of body dissatisfaction, we investigated the impact of different aspects of social pressure on body dissatisfaction in boys and girls within a longitudinal design. We expected that changes in perceived social pressure can predict changes in body dissatisfaction over a one-year period.

Based on the aspects of pressure that were found to affect body image in previous studies, we hypothesized the following:

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