

Interpersonal Influences on Body Image Development

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Our interpersonal relationships, the way we see ourselves in comparison to others, and the feedback we receive all contribute to our self-concept, including how we feel about our physical appearance. This premise is underscored when we consider what *really* makes us anxious about our appearance. More often than not, we are nervous about how others will evaluate the way we look. A passing comment can either elevate or dampen our mood and self-confidence: Hearing "You look great!," we feel uplifted, our confidence renewed; hearing, "You look tired today," we may feel *more* fatigued as well as self-conscious. A growing body of literature suggests that others' opinions have a profound impact on how we view and feel about our bodies. For example, Rosen and his colleagues conducted a comprehensive study on body image influences; of the 19 critical experience categories identified, more than half were tied to interpersonal factors such as feedback on appearance and peer or familial competition.

This chapter reviews the interpersonal processes that shape body image and examines evidence that explicit and implicit messages regarding appearance have an important effect on an individual's body image. The unique influences of peers, romantic partners, and strangers are described, implications for assessment and treatment offered, and directions for future research explored. (Kearney-Cooke discusses familial influences in the preceding chapter in this volume.)

INTERPERSONAL PROCESSES THAT SHAPE BODY IMAGE

Three primary interpersonal processes that play significant roles in the development of body image are reflected appraisals, feedback on physical appearance, and social comparison. The *reflected appraisal* process refers to the notion that others' opinions of us (or our perceptions of how others view us) have significant influence on how we see ourselves. In the area of physical attractiveness, research findings suggest that, for both children and adults, *perceptions* of others' evaluations have a significant impact on self-evaluations; indeed, others' actual appraisals have significantly less impact than individuals' often inaccurate perceptions of them.

Receiving *feedback on physical appearance* is often the means by which people develop perceptions of how others view them. This feedback may come from parents, siblings, peers, romantic partners, coaches, employers, or even complete strangers. Feedback may range from outright teasing or criticism to ambiguous comments or subtle body language. Regardless of the source or variety, any negative feedback about appearance can be damaging. The negative consequences associated with disparaging feedback have been well documented. Researchers have found that being teased is one of the most commonly reported precipitants of body dissatisfaction. A history of frequent teasing has been linked to higher levels of body dissatisfaction, eating disturbance, depression, and lower self-esteem in both adolescent and college females across numerous studies conducted in several countries. In a 3-year longitudinal investigation, Cattarin and Thompson found that being teased predicted increases in body dissatisfaction. In another line of research, people with physical deformities and body dysmorphic disorder have reported that being teased precipitated their body image symptoms.

Social comparison is yet another process through which self-appraisals of physical attractiveness are formed. Social comparison theory suggests that, within the realm of body image, the propensity to compare one's physical appearance to others moderates the extent to which the pervasive representation of the thin, attractive ideal results in body image disturbance. Research has shown that individuals who compare themselves to others whom they view as physically attractive rate their own attractiveness lower than individuals who compare themselves to others viewed as unattractive. Correlational studies have consistently found that higher levels of comparison are related to greater body dissatisfaction. In theory, targets of comparison should be important variables in determining how people feel about themselves. However, experimental manipulations of the social comparison process have led some researchers to suggest that it is the general tendency to compare oneself with others that plays a critical role in body image dissatisfaction, not to whom those comparisons are made. In a recent study by

Cattarin and colleagues, participants who were encouraged to compare themselves to thin models in commercials became more dissatisfied with their bodies than participants who were distracted or shown non-appearance-related commercials. (For further discussion of media influences, see Tiggemann's chapter in this volume.) Additional research has identified the frequency of appearance comparison as a predictor of body image and eating disturbances, thereby explaining more unique variance than do maturational status, teasing history, or awareness and internalization of socio-cultural pressures for thinness and attractiveness.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Body image development is a lifelong process inevitably influenced by the significant others who play the most central roles at different times in our lives. Thus young children may be most influenced by parents, whereas adolescents' body images may be more affected by interactions with peers. Adults' body images are likely to be influenced by romantic partners, who are often important sources of feedback and support. With these interpersonal processes in mind, the specific influences of peers, romantic partners, and strangers is discussed.

Peers

The influence of peer groups can be paramount, particularly throughout adolescence. The most obvious, direct manner in which peers may influence body image is through feedback on physical appearance. Teasing, in particular, is an experience common to most children and foreign to few adults. According to a study by Rieves and Cash on social development factors that contribute to women's body image, peers and friends are among the most frequent and "worst" perpetrators of teasing, second only to brothers. Being teased by peers is associated with greater concerns about physical appearance and more dieting behaviors.

Research findings suggest that the link between receiving appearance-related feedback from peers and the development of disturbance may not be direct. Rather, perceptions regarding peer acceptance may serve to elevate concerns about appearance. Studies have found that girls more often than boys believe that thinness increases likeability, and the extent to which this belief is held predicts weight and body image concerns. Girls in middle school report engaging in more body- and weight-related interactions than boys, and these interactions can become associated with weight and shape concerns later in development. In a recent study by Vincent and McCabe, surprisingly boys reported receiving more negative commentary from peers about weight and shape than girls did. However, in studies of adults, fe-

males typically report receiving more feedback on physical appearance than males. Ricciardelli and colleagues found that, regardless of quantity, boys viewed feedback from female friends as having a positive impact on body image, whereas they viewed feedback from male friends as more important in influencing body change methods, such as eating and exercise patterns.

In addition to appearance-related feedback, peers' modeling behaviors may influence body image and eating behaviors. Studies have shown that girls are more likely than boys to report peer modeling of weight loss behaviors. Paxton and colleagues' research on peer influences revealed that adolescent girls within friendship cliques are similar in the degree to which they are concerned about body image and engage in dieting behaviors. Studies of college-age women have also found similar levels of disordered eating among friends. Such findings lead to questions as to whether members within peer groups influence one another, or whether choice of peer groups reflects preexisting body image attitudes and eating behaviors. C. S. Crandall's study on the social contagion of binge eating found that, upon joining a sorority, its members' eating behaviors were uncorrelated, but after living together for a time, a member's binge eating could be predicted by the bingeing behavior of her friends.

Romantic Partners

Romantic partners spend a great deal of time together, share experiences, and allow themselves to be vulnerable in a way they rarely do with other people. Thus it seems likely that perceptions of how romantic partners feel about one another's looks and their feedback on each other's appearance will have a substantial impact on how they feel about themselves, their bodies, and their relationship. In fact, research in this area suggests that greater body dissatisfaction is associated with lower relationship satisfaction. Consistent with findings that suggest men place more emphasis on physical attractiveness than women, men's relationship satisfaction is significantly related to satisfaction with their partner's shape.

Research has also shown that both men's and women's perceptions of the opposite sex's body ideals are inaccurate. Women think their romantic partners prefer thinner figures than their partners actually prefer, and men and women both overestimate the breast/chest size preferred by the opposite sex. In a study designed to examine such perceptions, Tantleff-Dunn and Thompson investigated discrepancies between self-ratings and romantic partner ratings in relation to body image disturbance. We found that, for females, the discrepancy between self-rating and their *perception* of their partner's ideal explained the majority of variance in body dissatisfaction, eating disturbance, and general psychological functioning. In contrast, the discrepancy between males' self-ratings and their female partners' *actual* ratings of the ideal male figure predicted males' body image. We speculated

that females may provide their partners with more direct feedback that subsequently highlights this discrepancy.

Rieves and Cash developed the Physical Appearance in Intimate Relationships Scale (PAIRS) to measure one's perceptions of the partner's attitudes and behaviors vis-à-vis one's own appearance. More negative PAIRS scores were associated with greater body dissatisfaction and less relationship and sexual satisfaction for both sexes. The specific relationship between body image and dynamics within romantic relationships has yet to be empirically evaluated, but relevant qualitative data and anecdotal evidence suggest that body image distress may parallel characteristics of eating disorders in couples. As Thompson and his colleagues hypothesized in *Exacting Beauty*, individuals may knowingly or inadvertently encourage negative body image in their partners in order to maintain power, enhance self-image, encourage a partner's efforts to maintain or improve appearance, or foster dependency. Further research is needed to evaluate these possibilities.

It is important to note that, in addition to the feedback of romantic partners affecting body image, body image disturbance may have deleterious effects on relationships. For example, as Wiederman's chapter on body image attitudes and sexual functioning reveals, negative body image is associated with fewer sexual experiences and lower sexual satisfaction, and body image self-consciousness and avoidance in sexual situations is related to lower sex drive for both men and women. The relationship between body image and sexual functioning is a good illustration of the reciprocal nature of interpersonal influences: Just as body image disturbance may negatively impact a couple's sex life, a poor sexual relationship may exacerbate body image anxiety in partners who interpret sexual difficulties as a reflection of their unattractiveness and undesirability.

Strangers

The influence of strangers can be conceptualized as transmitting stereotypes of the appearance preferences of others. These stereotypes often emanate from sociocultural messages, so it is difficult to separate the effects of these influences on body image. Nonetheless, discrepancies between how individuals think they *should* look to be considered attractive to others and how they think they *actually* look can lead to significant body dissatisfaction.

Murray and colleagues examined the role of interpersonal influences in females with eating disorders and female and male controls. The researchers found that close to half of the total sample reported that members of the opposite sex, in general, affected their eating, exercise, and body satisfaction, with no significant differences between comparison groups. Women with eating disorders were most likely, and male controls were least likely, to report that members of the same sex influenced their body image and eating

behavior. Interestingly, men were more likely to indicate desire to look attractive to the opposite sex.

In addition to the somewhat passive influence introduced by concerns about appearing attractive to others, strangers may more directly influence body image by providing feedback on physical appearance. A dramatic example of this point relates to an incident that happened to a woman whom one of us (S.T.-D.) treated for obesity and depression. After mustering the motivation to begin an exercise program, her confidence was shattered when teenage boys in a passing car yelled "Cow!" when she was taking a brisk walk through her neighborhood. This cruel act undermined much of her progress and became the focus of several therapy sessions. Although the client eventually returned to exercising, she would only ride a stationary bike in the privacy of her home and had resigned herself to being a "social outcast" until she lost weight.

Fortunately, strangers' appearance-related feedback is often less critical and much more subtle. Research on appearance-related feedback indicates that facial expressions, topics of conversation, and levels of friendliness and respect sometimes convey a great deal of information about how others evaluate one's physical appearance. Numerous studies suggest that people ascribe a variety of negative attributes to individuals they perceive as unattractive and/or overweight. They give preferential treatment to attractive individuals (including children) across many contexts, and this differential treatment can lead to differences in psychosocial adjustment. Thus strangers can affect body image, which in turn can impact social functioning.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ASSESSMENT

Increasing recognition that interpersonal factors play an important role in the development and sequelae of body image disturbance has led to creation of several assessment measures that tap into the extent to which peers, family members, and others, in general, influence body image. A wide variety of these instruments, thoroughly reviewed in Thompson and colleagues' 1999 text, are readily accessible and valuable for both research and clinical purposes. Researchers have employed measures such as the Feedback on Physical Appearance Scale, Perception of Teasing Scale, Peer Dieting Survey, and the PAIRS to investigate the significance of these factors individually and in relation to one another. Including interpersonal measures in body image research may further enhance our understanding of how relationships fit into the complex picture of many widely studied variables that have failed to fully explain body image disturbances. Construction of additional psychometrically sound measures that are more comprehensive (some questionnaires contain as few as one to four items) may facilitate increased research efforts in this area.

Although many of the available instruments are easily administered questionnaires, clinicians may yield the most valuable information by simply asking clients about their teasing history, familial influences on body image, and perceptions of how romantic partners contribute to their appearance-related concerns. Clients may inadvertently omit interpersonal aspects of their body dissatisfaction, sometimes because they have difficulty recognizing when appearance concerns reflect experiences in their relationships. Children typically do not tell adults about teasing incidents, and adults sometimes do not recall their influential childhood experiences. Involving clients' significant others to gain their perspectives and observe their interactions may also prove beneficial. Overall, including interpersonal questionnaires and/or interviews may be helpful in treatment planning and may increase the effectiveness of most body image therapies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TREATMENT

Consideration of interpersonal factors leads us to approach not just assessment but also treatment from an interpersonal perspective. Interpersonal therapy (IPT) focuses primarily on helping clients identify and modify interpersonal problems and enhance their relationships rather than concentrating on overt symptoms of disturbance (e.g., body image concerns). Traditionally, cognitive-behavior therapy has been the treatment of choice for body image disturbances (see Cash and Strachan's chapter in this volume). Although the efficacy of IPT is yet to be determined, outcome research has yielded promising results of IPT treatment for eating disorders. As reviewed in Garner and Garfinkel's *Handbook of Treatment for Eating Disorders*, Fairburn and his colleagues have conducted several studies that compared IPT, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), behavior therapy (BT), group therapy, and wait-list controls. The findings have sometimes favored CBT, but the research has generally demonstrated that IPT has a profound and sustained impact. In fact, in one study IPT patients surpassed those in CBT over a 12-month follow-up period, and another study showed no significant differences between CBT and IPT at posttreatment and follow-up. Therefore, using IPT as a primary or at least adjunctive therapy for body image disturbance may be beneficial, especially for clients whose social relationships clearly contribute to their negative body image.

Another implication of an interpersonal perspective on body image is the value of including significant others in treatment. From educating family members and romantic partners about their impact on a client's body image to clarifying misinterpreted feedback, broadening the focus to include others may be therapeutic for everyone involved. In addition, group therapy and the opportunity to enhance communication and relationship skills may be beneficial when issues such as lack of assertiveness are involved in clients' struggles with body image.

SUMMARY AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the research to date, we can say with relative certainty that interpersonal factors have a significant impact on the development of body image and on body image states in everyday life. In short, what others think and do matters; but perhaps more importantly, *perceptions* of what others think and prefer regarding physical appearance influence how we feel about our bodies. Despite the widely accepted premise that the opinions of others influence development of the self, research has largely been limited to understanding the importance individuals place on those opinions rather than exploring their actual impact. Whereas sociocultural and social comparison theories have been the subject of many investigations, more personally relevant interpersonal experiences have received relatively limited attention. Within a culture that contains pervasive, almost inescapable, messages that physical attractiveness is important and where unrealistic images of thinness and muscularity abound, we must investigate why some individuals develop body image disturbances and others do not. Do familial and peer subcultures transmit appearance-related beliefs, values, and behaviors that serve either to buffer or amplify media influences and other sociocultural pressures? To what extent do age, gender, and ethnicity mediate interpersonal influences? Do differences in cognitive processing account for differential responses to teasing and others forms of appearance-related feedback? Clearly, further research is needed to answer these questions and elucidate the processes by which interpersonal experiences impact body image. This knowledge holds the potential to enhance current approaches to treatment and prevention of negative body image.

INFORMATIVE READINGS

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