

Influences of ethnicity and socioeconomic status on the body dissatisfaction and eating behaviour of Australian children and adolescents

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Abstract

The present study examined the association between socioeconomic status (SES), ethnicity, body dissatisfaction, and eating behaviours of 10- to 18-year-old children and adolescents. The study participants ($N=768$) were categorised as Caucasian (74.7%), Chinese or Vietnamese (18.2%), and Italian or Greek (7.0%), and high (82%), middle (8.6%), and low SES (9.4%) according to parents' occupations. The χ^2 , Mann–Whitney U test and Kruskal–Wallis test and logistic regression model were used to determine the interaction between variables. Females and older participants were more likely to desire a body figure that was thinner than their perceived current figure. Furthermore, the same groups were also more likely to be preoccupied with eating problems (females 7.1% vs. males 1.4%; for participants aged 15–18 years, 7.8% vs. participants aged 10–14 years, 3.9%). The body dissatisfaction gender difference was females 42.8% vs. males 11.8%, and participants aged 15–18 years 41.7% vs. those aged 10–14 years, 28.3%. Participants whose parents were managers/professionals were more likely to desire a body figure that was thinner than their perceived current figure than those from white-collar and blue-collar families. This was also the case for Caucasian Australians compared to those from Chinese or Vietnamese backgrounds. In conclusion, age and gender differences in body image and problems in eating behaviour were evident among children and

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adolescents. However, there was no significant SES and ethnic difference in the proportion of participants with eating problems and body dissatisfaction.

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1. Introduction

With the rapid increase in the prevalence of overweight and obesity in children and adolescents in recent decades in most industrialised countries (Chinn & Rona, 2001; Flegal, Ogden, Wei, Kuczmarski, & Johnson, 2001), the related health risk factors, such as the overconsumption of food and a sedentary lifestyle, have received considerable attention. Paradoxically, recognition of the merits of regular physical activity and the desirability of leanness as opposed to fatness has resulted in an increased concern for body shape in both genders and in individuals of all ages, but especially in youth (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). The health-related behaviours displayed by young males and females appear to reflect a heightened concern with body image and the increasing cultural pressure on both sexes to fit an ‘ideal’ body shape. Furthermore, a preoccupation with physical attractiveness may lead to unhealthy weight-loss behaviours and eating problems (Abraham, 2003; Killen et al., 1994; Thompson, Covert, Richards, Johnson, & Gattarin, 1995; Smolak, Levine, & Gralen, 1993; Stormer & Thompson, 1996; Wertheim et al., 1992).

The well-documented research on gender and age differences in body image suggests that girls primarily report greater body image concerns and desire to be thinner than boys (Collins, 1991; Lawrence & Thelen, 1995; Mendelson, White, & Mendelson, 1996; Wood, Becker, & Thompson, 1996). In addition, body dissatisfaction becomes more pronounced with increasing age in girls (Gardner, Sorter, & Friedman, 1997; Rolland, Farnill, & Griffiths, 1997). In terms of gender and age differences for eating problems in youth, some studies have revealed that such differences occur in children aged 10 years and over (Lawrence & Thelen, 1995; Rolland et al., 1997). However, little research has explored the association of body dissatisfaction with ethnicity. A previous study found that African American children desired a body figure that was larger than their perceived figure, while more Caucasian children desired a body figure that was thinner than their perceived current figure (Lawrence & Thelen, 1995). In concert with this finding, the prevalence of eating disorders among African Americans is rare (Rand & Kaldua, 1990). Further exploration of the body image concerns of children and adolescents from other cultural backgrounds is required. In addition, few studies have examined the effects of socioeconomic status (SES) on body dissatisfaction and eating problems among children and adolescents. In an earlier Australian study, O’Dea (1994) found no difference between adolescent girls from low or middle/upper socioeconomic groups for measures of body image and eating behaviours, while others have found an association (Paxton, Sculthorpe, & Gibbons, 1994; Walters & Kendler, 1995; Wardle & Marsland, 1990).

The sociocultural factors—families, peers, and the media have recently appeared as the three primary risk factors influencing body image and disordered eating behaviours (Blowers, Loxton, Grady-Flessner, Occhipinti, & Dawe, 2003; Stice, 1994, 1998; Stice, Ziemba, Margolis, & Flik, 1996). However, there is a paucity of data on body image characteristics of children and adolescents from

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