

Original article

Friendship Group Influences on Body Dissatisfaction and Dieting Among Adolescent Girls: A Prospective Study

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Abstract

Purpose: Although some studies among adolescent girls found that friends within friendship groups were rather similar on dieting and/or body image constructs, these studies were limited by their cross-sectional designs. The current prospective study is the first to examine friendship group influences on eating disorder risk factors, including body dissatisfaction, weight concerns, dietary restraint, and dieting in adolescent girls.

Methods: Design was a two-wave prospective study with 1-year interval. Of 863 girls (mean age = 13.8, SD = .7), 344 were members of one of the 103 reciprocal friendship groups identified using social network analysis.

Results: Reciprocal friends were similar with respect to body image and dieting constructs. However, initial friendship group levels of body dissatisfaction, weight concerns, dietary restraint, and dieting did not predict individual body image and dieting variables 1 year later.

Conclusions: The current findings attest to the significance of reciprocal friendship group correlates of eating disorder risk factors, but suggest that during early-to-mid-adolescence, levels of body image concerns and dieting within reciprocal friendship groups do not influence adolescents' own body image concerns and dieting over 1 year of time. © 2010 Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Body image; Dieting; Eating disturbances; Peer influences; Social networks

Concerns about body image and related dieting behaviors are common among adolescents, in particular girls [1]. This is alarming given that body dissatisfaction and related dieting are important risk factors for future eating pathology [2] and psychological distress [3]. It is therefore of utmost importance to investigate factors underlying the development of these eating disorder risk factors during adolescence.

Sociocultural theories on the etiology of body dissatisfaction and dieting pose peers, parents, and media as important factors influencing body dissatisfaction and dieting [4,5]. Most previous research examined the roles of family [6] and media [7], whereas relatively less attention has been paid to the influence of peers. This is remarkable, as during

adolescence, children spend increasingly more time with peers and the need to belong to a group and to be accepted by peers is often much higher during this period than during other periods in life [8].

Some studies investigated adolescents' perceptions of their friends' attitudes or behaviors. Perceived peer talk about weight loss and perceived peer dieting were found to be associated with individual dieting attempts and drive for thinness among adolescent girls [9,10]. Longitudinal research found that appearance or social comparison and appearance or conversations with friends predicted body dissatisfaction 1 year later [11]. Further, perceived friend's dieting predicted an increase in body dissatisfaction 5 years later [12]. However, the use of the adolescents' perceptions of their friends' body dissatisfaction or dieting may result in errors in estimating influence. It is possible that adolescents simply perceive their friends to be dieting, but that there is no actual influence between friends. To control for that possibility,

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studies in which friends report on their own behaviors are needed [13].

Two cross-sectional studies based on peer-report measures found that girls within reciprocal friendship groups were rather similar on dieting and/or body image constructs [13,14]. A study found no similarity on body image or eating disturbance within peer groups [15]. However, a large percentage of this sample consisted of girls without reciprocated friendship ties. When relatively few friendship links are present, there is decreased opportunity for communication and interaction among friends. Because eating disorder risk factors are less easily observable characteristics compared with smoking (for instance), we propose that communication and interaction are essential prerequisites for the transference of these characteristics. Because communication and interaction between peers is most likely to occur in reciprocated friendships, we have chosen to focus on this kind of friendship.

Although the mechanisms responsible for influence processes remain unknown, theoretically, two general mechanisms may explain reciprocal peer influence through communication and interaction: modelling and norm setting. Social learning theory specifies that peers may influence each other by observing, modelling, and imitating behavior of important individuals in their environment [16]. A reciprocal friend is an important figure in the life of an adolescent and may thus be an important modelling source. Group norm setting may also be a powerful mechanism in determining an individual's behavior. Body image concerns and related dieting are salient concerns for a large proportion of adolescent girls, [17] and adherence to group norms set for body image and dieting may be essential to keep reciprocal friendship ties.

Similarity within adolescent peer groups at one time point may not only be caused by influence processes. Selection mechanisms may also play a role. Selection occurs when similar adolescents (more or less consciously) chose each other as friends. The similarity-attraction theory [18] may provide an explanation for the existence of selection processes, proposing that attractiveness of potential friends is associated with similarity in one or more characteristics. Prospective research would help to disentangle peer influence from selection.

Our study is the first to prospectively examine the influence of friendship groups on body dissatisfaction and dieting during adolescence. Design was a two-wave prospective study with a 1-year interval. Our sample consisted of early-to-mid-adolescent girls. This specific period in the adolescent years is seen as an opportune time for examining the role of friendship groups on body dissatisfaction and dieting. First, the ages of the girls in the current study correspond to the ages that were associated with increases in body dissatisfaction [19] and dieting [20] previously. Second, early-to-middle adolescence is a developmental phase specifically associated with the need to feel accepted by peers, which may intensify peer influence on body image and dieting during this time [21]. We focused on girls because they are more likely to develop

eating disorder risk factors. We used statistical controls to measure influence unconfounded with selection [22].

Methods

Participants and procedure

This report is drawn from a larger longitudinal project entitled the “*Mental Health and Health Habits*” study. The Institutional Review Board of the Behavioural Science Institute at the Radboud University Nijmegen approved this project. Adolescents were recruited from seven public middle schools [23]. The first wave of data collection (Wave 1 [W1]) was conducted in the spring of 2007, and the second wave (W2) 1 year later. Adolescents were promised about confidentiality. They completed a 10-page survey in classes, and were individually weighed and measured out of sight of the class mates by trained researchers. A numeric code was used to identify adolescents and to ensure confidentiality.

At W1, 2051 adolescents (92.6%) participated [23]. The sample that participated in both W1 and W2 of the study was a subsample of 1753 (86%) adolescents (890 boys and 863 girls). A total of 8% of our initial sample ($n = 2,051$) had moved or left school and could not be located, 6% of the children were absent during the W2 measurement (sick-leave), an additional .4% of the children denied permission at W2, and .3% had incomplete or invalid data. In the present study, only the 863 girls were selected, of whom both Time 1 (T1) and T2 data were available. Logistic regression analysis showed that adolescent girls who did not complete the second measurement were somewhat older; $OR = 1.52 (1.14–2.03)$. No differences were found between drop-outs and completers on baseline body mass index (BMI), dietary restraint, weight concerns, body dissatisfaction, or dieting.

The 863 adolescent participating girls were approximately 14 years (age: $M = 13.8$, $SD = .7$) at baseline. Most of the participants were of Dutch origin (>95%). All participants followed regular secondary education: 16.5% followed low secondary education, 20.0% intermediate secondary education, 24.6% intermediate to high secondary education, and 38.9% followed the highest level of secondary education possible in The Netherlands (preuniversity education).

Measures

Friendship groups. At T1, girls were provided with a list of names of the students in their class. All girls were asked to nominate their five best friends with their very best friend nominated first. The SocStat statistical program [24] was used to analyze friendship groups for each class. Four important characteristics applied for all friendship groups. First, only reciprocated friendship ties were included in the friendship group analyses. Second, dyads were removed from the sample. Dyads differ from larger social networks [25] in their intensity, intimacy, degree of conformity, and interpersonal style. Third, three cross-sex friendship groups were removed from the sample. Fourth, participants were

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