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Self-esteem and loneliness in Russian adolescents with body dissatisfaction

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Abstract

Adolescents satisfied and dissatisfied with their body were compared in body image, appearance perception, self-esteem and loneliness. The majority of adolescents made a clear distinction between the concepts of “body” and “appearance”. Body image and body satisfaction were associated primarily with weight perception. Adolescents with body dissatisfaction viewed themselves as weak and inactive, had an intense conflict between the actual and desired self, and often experienced a feeling of loneliness. The most significant body areas were the abdomen, thighs and breasts for girls, and the shoulders, chest and muscle mass for boys.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is a time when the appearance and the body move from the periphery of children’s attention to its center. Body image for contemporary teenagers is increasingly becoming a cause of disturbances, anxiety, depression and eating disorders [1], [2], [3], [4], [5]. So, the rise of scientific interest in the problem of body perception in adolescents is not surprising.

Researchers define body image as a multidimensional construct including at least perceptual, affective, cognitive, evaluative and behavioral dimensions [6], [7]. According to Muth and Cash [8, p.1438], it reflects how individuals “think, feel and behave with regard to their own physical attributes”. These dimensions are often studied in adults, and rarely in adolescents and children, which makes it difficult to trace the development of body attitudes. Moreover, studies involving children adopt a broader understanding of body image, limited to the dissatisfaction criterion and a total disregard for the emotional and behavioral consequences of this dissatisfaction.

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Hardit and Hannum [9] proposed a tripartite influence model for analyzing the development of negative attitudes to appearance and body. The main predictors of body dissatisfaction were parental influence (family messages, parental concern and criticism about children's appearance and weight), peer influence (appearance-related teasing, social status in a peer group) and mass media (imposing the stereotypes of beauty). They claimed the last factor to be the most significant. Studies in Russia [10] indicated that for Russian adolescents, the most important factor was parental influence, which also included the modeling of behavioral patterns towards the body and looks, adherence to certain rules with respect to body care, eating behavior, sports, etc.

A certain level of body dissatisfaction in adolescence is, in fact, “normative” [11], but it is crucial to distinguish children who are at risk for eating disorders and depression. The lack of epidemiological data makes it difficult to estimate when body and appearance dissatisfaction becomes a problem and interferes with a child's well-being. It is believed that girls' concerns over their body are more likely to turn into destructive behavior than those of boys since appearance is an important indicator of self-worth with girls [12]. For boys, self-worth is based on abilities rather than on physical attractiveness. However, modern adolescent boys feel anxious about their appearance and body, and suffer from imperfection no less than girls [13].

The aim of this research was to study body and appearance perception, self-esteem and feelings of loneliness in adolescents with body dissatisfaction. The following issues were under scrutiny: how body and appearance dissatisfaction manifests emotionally and in behavioral strategies; how it is refracted in self-image, self-esteem and desired self; whether body and appearance dissatisfaction in combination with self-esteem may contribute to isolation and loneliness in adolescents, for whom communication is a leading activity at this stage of development. It was also questioned whether there are gender differences and what they are.

2. Method

The participants were 66 Russian adolescents aged 13–15 years (34 boys and 32 girls). They completed the following measures: 1) “Attitudes towards body and appearance” questionnaire; 2) Human figure drawings [14]; 3) The Color-A-Person body dissatisfaction Test, CAPT [15], [16]; 4) Dembo-Rubinstein Self-Esteem Scale [17]; 5) a modified Russian version of the semantic differential to estimate the concept of “myself” [18], 6) UCLA Loneliness Scale [19]. Responses to the questionnaire allowed us to form two subsamples of subjects, satisfied with their body (Sample 1, $N = 27$), and dissatisfied (Sample 2, $N = 39$). Content analysis of the data and further statistical analysis using chi-square and Mann-Whitney test were carried out.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Perception of body and appearance in adolescents with body dissatisfaction

Preliminary data analysis showed that the majority of adolescents (64%) differentiate between the concepts of body and appearance. The concepts have distinct semantic fields for them, whereby body satisfaction does not always imply appearance satisfaction and vice versa. Appearance satisfaction coupled with body dissatisfaction was a significantly more frequent combination. Appearance for adolescents is the face and its elements, including the hair, while the body is the rest of the corpus from the neck. Previous research has shown that for adult women, the body and appearance are related concepts, and the face is a part of the body [20]. At what age a “face” becomes incorporated into the general concept of “body” and whether there are gender differences, is the subject of further research.

A comparative analysis of the two samples revealed the following differences between adolescents satisfied and dissatisfied with their bodies. Adolescents with body dissatisfaction more often believed that they were overweight ($p > 0,001$, Pearson's χ^2 test) and needed to lose weight ($p > 0,001$, Pearson's χ^2 test). They were more worried about their bodies ($p > 0,001$, Pearson's χ^2 test), indicating as a reason for concern their particular figures or weight characteristics: “fat is somewhere there”, “I'm not skinny”, “no muscles, just fat”,

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