



Does body satisfaction influence self-esteem in adolescents' daily lives? An experience sampling study



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ABSTRACT

This study examined, within the context of the Contingencies of Self-Worth model, state-based associations between self-esteem and body satisfaction using the experience sampling method. One hundred and forty-four adolescent girls (mean age = 14.28 years) completed up to 6 assessments per day for one week using Palm Digital Assistants, in addition to baseline measures of trait body satisfaction and self-esteem. Results showed considerable variation in both state-based constructs within days, and evidence of effects of body satisfaction on self-esteem, but not vice versa. Although these state-based associations were small in size and weakened as the time lag between assessments increased for the sample as a whole, individual differences in the magnitude of these effects were observed and predicted by trait self-esteem and body satisfaction. Collectively, these findings offer support for key tenets of the Contingencies of Self-Worth model.

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Adolescence is characterized by considerable changes in terms of physical, social, cognitive, and emotional development. During this developmental period, adolescents typically undergo both gender-specific and gender-neutral physiological changes due to puberty such as increases in testosterone for both genders, breast development, weight gain, and menarche for girls, and muscle development, deepened voice, and increased body hair for boys (Ellison & Reiche, 2012). It is unsurprising then that there is a noticeable spike in self-consciousness during adolescence as young people begin to grapple with sense of identity (Somerville et al., 2013). This uncertainty in identity and seeking of approval makes adolescents particularly vulnerable to low self-esteem (Wu, Watkins, & Hattie, 2010), which in turn is associated with a variety of adverse health outcomes.

Adolescents who exhibit high levels of self-esteem are more likely to engage in health behavior (e.g., healthy dietary habits and physical activity; Kristjánsson, Sigfúsdóttir, & Allegrante, 2010), exhibit better academic attendance and performance (Kristjánsson et al., 2010), and may experience greater economic prosperity in adulthood (Trzesniewski et al., 2006). In contrast, adolescents with low self-esteem are more likely to display antisocial behavior (Barry, Grafeman, Adler, & Pickard, 2007; Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005), report suicidal ideation (McGee & Williams, 2000), engage in

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substance abuse (Flory, Lynam, Milich, Leukefeld, & Clayton, 2004), and experience poorer mental and physical health (Millings, Buck, Montgomery, Spears, & Stallard, 2012; Orth, Robins, & Roberts, 2008; Trzesniewski et al., 2006).

Crocker and Wolfe's (2001) Contingencies of Self-Worth model provides a comprehensive framework within which to understand both intra- and inter-individual differences in self-esteem. This model relies upon two key distinctions between: (1) global and domain-specific components of self-esteem, and (2) stable (trait-like) and variable (state-based) characteristics of self-esteem. Crocker and Wolfe assert that global assessments of self-worth derive from evaluation of one's worth across a range of domains that are personally relevant, such as appearance, friendship, scholastic achievement, etc. This assumption implies that domains of self-worth influence global self-worth, and not vice versa. The assumption is also important because it allows for individuals to differ in the domains that predict their global self-worth and, thus, may explain why poor self-ratings in a given domain may be impactful for one individual's global self-worth but not for another individual.

The second distinction – between state and trait self-esteem – provides a basis for understanding why individuals who are generally high or low in self-esteem (i.e., trait-level self-esteem) may experience transient phases of low or heightened self-esteem, respectively. Although an individual is ultimately likely to return to her/his trait level self-esteem, these state-like changes in self-esteem may have acute effects on behavior, and is worth exploring on that basis alone.

For adolescents (especially female adolescents), body image appears to be a particularly salient domain of self-esteem. Body image is consistently ranked among the top three concerns for adolescents (e.g., *Mission Australia*, 2011, 2012, 2013), with estimates from US and Australian community-based samples suggesting that approximately one-third of adolescent girls and one-quarter of adolescent boys are extremely dissatisfied with their appearance (*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 2014; *Mission Australia*, 2013), whereas only 11% of girls and 38% of boys surveyed indicated that they were unconcerned with their appearance (*Mission Australia*, 2013). Moreover, up to two-thirds of adolescent girls and one-third of adolescent boys reported engaging in dieting behaviors to lose weight (*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 2014).

The importance of body image in adolescents' self-concept is well supported by cross-sectional studies that typically find a strong relationship between body satisfaction and self-esteem, with correlation-based effect sizes varying from .62 to .65 (Harter, 1998). Longitudinal studies in which baseline body satisfaction (rather than change in this baseline variable) is used to predict subsequent change in self-esteem over timeframes of 1–5 years provide support for causal influence of body satisfaction on self-esteem (Barker & Bornstein, 2009; Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Eisenberg, 2006; Tiggemann, 2005). However, the effect sizes in these longitudinal studies are much more modest than the cross-sectional effects reported by Harter (1998), and could be characterized as small (all longitudinal effects ranged from sr^2 of .01 to sr^2 of .03) by conventional effect size guidelines (e.g., Cohen, 1988; Ferguson, 2009).

We argue on several grounds that these prior longitudinal effects may have under-estimated the influence of body satisfaction on self-esteem. First, as posited by Crocker and Wolfe (2001), the influence of a given domain on global self-esteem is itself an individual difference factor. These prior longitudinal studies report effects that summarize for the sample as a whole, and may thus, under-estimate for some individuals, and over-estimate for others. For instance, those with higher trait-level self-esteem and body satisfaction at baseline may be more or less likely to exhibit change in these constructs over time than individuals with lower trait levels.

Second, these longitudinal studies have focused on trait body image and self-esteem, which, by definition, are stable and unlikely to fluctuate much over time (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Rosenberg (1986) distinguishes between baseline instability in self-esteem (long-term change, as examined in the aforementioned prospective studies) and barometric instability in self-esteem (fluctuations that occur over much shorter timeframes, such as hours or days). Both Rosenberg (1986) and Crocker and Wolfe (2001) argue that change is more likely (and frequently) to occur at this state level. Although neither of these authors provides guidelines for the appropriate time frame to assess this change, separate studies of state self-esteem and state body satisfaction show that these constructs vary multiple times within a given day (Colautti et al., 2011; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2009). Thus, it is reasonable to predict that the influence of state body satisfaction on state self-esteem may occur along similar timeframes, although empirical evaluation is necessary.

Despite the importance of state-based self-esteem in both the Contingencies of Self-Worth model (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001) and in the work of Rosenberg (1986), associations between self-esteem and body satisfaction have not been explored at the state level in naturalistic settings. The present study overcomes this gap by using the experience sampling method (ESM; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987) to evaluate cross-sectional and longitudinal associations between state self-esteem and body satisfaction in a sample of Australian adolescent girls. ESM, rather than an experimental design, was chosen because: (i) the former approach offers greater ecological validity by sampling in one's daily life instead of laboratory settings, and (ii) extensive resampling of momentary experiences – as is common for ESM based studies – allows for examination of how the strength of longitudinal association between IV and DV varies as a function of time lag (Shiffman, Stone, & Hufford, 2008). This latter feature of ESM is particularly advantageous given that the time required for self-esteem and body satisfaction to influence each other is unclear.

Based on prior evidence from cross-sectional and prospective studies, as mentioned above, it is anticipated that the relationship between state self-esteem and body satisfaction will be stronger for concurrent assessments of these constructs than for lagged associations. Consistent with the Contingencies of Self-Worth model (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001), it is predicted that the lagged associations between these constructs will be stronger with self-esteem as the outcome

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