



## The longitudinal causal directionality between body image distress and self-esteem among Korean adolescents: The moderating effect of relationships with parents



Woochul Park\*, Norman B. Epstein

Department of Family Science, University of Maryland, 1142 School of Public Health Building, College Park, MD 20742, United States

### A B S T R A C T

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This study examined the longitudinal relationship between self-esteem and body image distress, as well as the moderating effect of relationships with parents, among adolescents in Korea, using nationally representative prospective panel data. Regarding causal direction, the findings supported bi-directionality for girls, but for boys the association was unidirectional, in that their self-esteem predicted body image distress, but not vice versa. A gender difference also emerged in the moderating effect of quality of relationships with parents. For girls, relationships with parents moderated the effect of body image distress on self-esteem, such that when relationships with parents were better, the effect of greater body image distress on subsequent lower self-esteem was stronger than when relationships with parents were less positive. For boys, relationships with parents moderated the influence of self-esteem on body image distress, such that self-esteem reduced body image distress more when boys had better relationships with parents.

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The relationship between positive body image and self-esteem among adolescents has been well documented in correlational studies (Dorak, 2011; Horn, Newton, & Evers, 2011; Mirza, Mackey, Armstrong, Jaramillo, & Palmer, 2011; Shaw, Stice, & Springer, 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006), and it is found regardless of age and gender (van den Berg, Mond, Eisenberg, Ackard, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2010). Furthermore, the association between body image and self-esteem has been found to be higher than those between self-esteem and other domains of life experience such as scholastic competence, social acceptance, and athletic competence, across age groups from children to middle-aged adults, and across countries (Harter, 1999). Given that problems with negative body image and low self-esteem are common during adolescence and commonly co-occur, it is important to understand the association between these two domains of subjective personal experience, especially with a goal of developing preventive and therapeutic interventions.

Authors of some cross-sectional studies have cited their findings as providing support for a causal path from body image to self-esteem (Delfabbro, Winefield, Anderson, Hammarstrom, & Winefield, 2011; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Frost & McKelvie, 2004; Han & Kim, 2006; Mendelson, White, & Mendelson, 1996; Park & Choi, 2008; Polce-Lynch, Myers, Klierer, & Kilmartin, 2001), or from self-esteem to body image (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007; Mendelson et al., 1996), drive for thinness (Brunet, Sabiston, Dorsch, & McCreary, 2010), and body dissatisfaction (Kostanski & Gullone, 1998; Makinen, Puukko-Viertomies, Lindberg, Siimes, & Aalberg, 2012). Although the cross-sectional studies have identified a robust association between

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 301 405 3672; fax: +1 301 314 9161.

E-mail addresses: [sentip@umd.edu](mailto:sentip@umd.edu) (W. Park), [nbe@umd.edu](mailto:nbe@umd.edu) (N.B. Epstein).

self-esteem and body image, they necessarily are inconclusive regarding the causal direction between the two characteristics because they do not identify temporal processes between variables. In contrast, longitudinal studies have potential to isolate causal pathways between self-esteem and body image, which would have important implications for designing interventions for reducing risk factors for low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and eating disorders among adolescents.

To date, there have been contradictory results from the small number of longitudinal studies on the link between self-esteem and body image. Regarding studies examining the causal direction from body image to subsequent self-esteem, Johnson and Wardle (2005) found that body dissatisfaction predicted English adolescent girls' low self-esteem over the course of 10–11 months. Similarly, Tiggemann (2005) demonstrated that Australian girls' body dissatisfaction predicted lower self-esteem two years later. Also, Birkeland, Melkevik, Holsen, and Wold (2012) found that Norwegian adolescents' body image partially predicted their trajectories of self-esteem development from age 14 to 23. In contrast, Mendelson et al.'s (1996) study conducted in Canada indicated that adolescent boys' and girls' body esteem did not predict their self-esteem two years later. Inconsistent longitudinal findings also have been found regarding self-esteem as a predictor of subsequent body image. Tiggemann (2005) and Mendelson et al. (1996) found no significant longitudinal prediction from self-esteem to body image. However, Paxton, Eisenberg, and Neumark-Sztainer (2006) found that for adolescent girls, but not for boys, self-esteem predicted body dissatisfaction five years later.

Treatment studies that examined changes in adolescents' functioning over the course of therapeutic interventions also have provided some support for a causal link between self-esteem and body image. McVey and Davis (2002) found that a self-esteem enhancement program increased body image satisfaction of early adolescents. O'Dea and Abraham's 2000 program that focused on building self-esteem significantly lowered adolescents' scores on measures of drive for thinness and body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, Armitage (2012) found that the impact of a self-affirmation intervention on adolescent girls' body dissatisfaction was mediated by effects on their levels of self-esteem. Specifically, girls in the intervention group, who were asked to recall and provide examples of their own past acts of kindness, showed a significantly greater increase in self-esteem than did girls in the untreated control group, which in turn was associated with increased body satisfaction.

The inconsistent findings from existing studies point to a need for further longitudinal research to resolve whether body image influences overall self-esteem, self-esteem influences body image, or both processes occur. In addition, the prior prospective studies (e.g., Johnson & Wardle, 2005; Mendelson et al., 1996; Paxton et al., 2006; Tiggemann, 2005) primarily used convenience samples, which limit representativeness of the findings. Thus, there is a need for studies using nationally representative prospective data, in order to allow clear inferences regarding the direction of the relationship between low self-esteem and body image distress in the adolescent population. The present study addressed this need for a more representative sample as well as longitudinal data.

Variation in findings among prior studies also may be due to the fact that body image is a multidimensional construct (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999), and studies that examined the relationship between body image and self-esteem have used measures of a variety of body image variables, such as body dissatisfaction (van den Berg et al., 2010; Tiggemann, 2005), appearance appraisal (Kutob, Senf, Crago, & Shisslak, 2010), drive for thinness (Brunet et al., 2010), and body-esteem (Ata et al., 2007). The most commonly used concept has been body dissatisfaction, which can include both affective and cognitive dimensions, but studies have not distinguished between the cognitive and affective components. Although dissatisfaction involves a cognitive evaluation of how acceptable one's body is in relation to some standard, that evaluation is not necessarily accompanied by emotional distress. A person could be dissatisfied with his or her body but be only mildly emotionally upset if he or she believes that body appearance is of low importance in life. Emotional distress seems more likely to occur when an individual believes that body appearance is important *and* is dissatisfied with his/her body. The present study used a *body image distress* index that taps emotional distress by assessing the adolescent's subjective experience of stress associated with his or her weight, height, and facial appearance.

Furthermore, in order to understand the link between body image distress and self-esteem more fully, it is important to identify potential moderators of the association between the two variables. Prior studies have paid little attention to such moderator variables. Social interactions with significant others are noteworthy as potential moderators, because symbolic interaction theory emphasizes how an individual's self-concept and evaluation are socially constructed through exchanges with significant others, such as parents (White & Klein, 2007, pp. 99–120; Chapter 4). This perspective suggests that good relationships with parents may buffer an association between an adolescent's body image distress and low self-esteem. If this is the case, programs intended to reduce the relationship between body image distress and self-esteem could focus more systemically on the parent–child relationship as well as on established interventions targeting the individual adolescent's body image and/or self-esteem-related concerns.

In addition to relationships with significant others such as parents, cultural values constitute another contextual level that may influence body image and self-esteem. Although body appearance tends to be important to adolescents in general, the values in some cultures especially may contribute to body image being a core influence on adolescents' well-being. For example, Asian cultures tend to be collectivist, with people placing great importance on relationships with others and being sensitive to how others view them (Cohen & Hoshino-Browne, 2005; Nisbett, 2003). In this context, body image, which reflects the self as presented to others, could be particularly important. However, there has been limited research on body image in Asian adolescent populations (e.g., Jackson & Chen, 2010; Mellor et al., 2009; Xu et al., 2010), and more studies are needed.

The present study addresses this need by focusing on Korean adolescents. There is evidence that Korean people commonly focus on their body appearance and the management of it. Overall, Koreans are the thinnest among peoples of the

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