



Parental comments: Relationship with gender, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating in Asian young adults



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 January 2015

Received in revised form 17 October 2015

Accepted 18 December 2015

Available online 12 January 2016

Keywords:

Parental influence
Parental comments
Body dissatisfaction
Disordered eating
Young adults
Asian

ABSTRACT

The present study explored the relationships between different categories of parental comments (negative, positive, and importance and comparison), body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating concerns in 383 young adults (69% female) in Singapore. Self-report measures of parental comments, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating were completed with results indicating that females, compared to males, reported significantly higher levels of body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, and negative maternal and positive paternal comments. Although the relationships found between the different categories of parental comments, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating differed by gender, negative maternal comments emerged as a consistent predictor of disordered eating for both genders. This relationship was partially mediated by body dissatisfaction. The findings highlight the role of parental influence through weight-related comments on body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, and the need for further exploration of gender-specific pathways of parental influence.

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Introduction

Parental influence is one of the most salient sociocultural factors related to the development of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, such as restrained and affect-regulatory eating, in young adults (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007; Eli, Howell, Fisher, & Nowicka, 2014; Rodgers & Chabrol, 2009; Rodgers, Paxton, & Chabrol, 2009). The active influence perspective construes this as a result of parent–child communications and interactions (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). In the case of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, the perceived parental pressure from parental comments about the child, made to the child forms an important component of a parent's active influence.

Parental comments regarding body shape, weight, and eating behaviours have been linked with body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, and can be divided into three categories: (1) negative, (2) positive, and (3) importance and comparison comments (Abraczinskas, Fisak, & Barnes, 2012; Rodgers, Paxton, et al., 2009; Vincent & McCabe, 2000; Wertheim, Martin, Prior, Sanson,

& Smart, 2002). Negative parental comments convey criticisms about weight and shape, eating habits, and fitness, and have been associated with the development of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating amongst adolescents and young adults of both genders (Abraczinskas et al., 2012; Eli et al., 2014; Gross & Nelson, 2000; Hanna & Bond, 2006; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010; Sharpe, Naumann, Treasure, & Schmidt, 2013; Vincent & McCabe, 2000). Positive parental comments convey positive and supportive views on body shape and weight that discourage appearance-ideal pursuits, and have been proposed to be protective against body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Berge et al., 2013; Gross & Nelson, 2000; Herbozo & Thompson, 2006; Ricciardelli, McCabe, & Banfield, 2000; Rodgers & Chabrol, 2009). However, positive parental comments were also found to reinforce the emphasis on appearance, and associated with negative outcomes (Herbozo & Thompson, 2006; Kluck, 2010; Rodgers, Paxton, et al., 2009). Importance and comparison parental comments include wide-ranging comments emphasising the importance of one's physical appearance and comparisons of body shape and weight with others. These comments were associated with body dissatisfaction and disordered eating in male and female adolescents and young women (Bauer, Bucchianeri, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2013; Fulkerson et al., 2002; Keery, Boutelle, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2005; Rodgers, Paxton, et al., 2009; Schwartz, Phares, Tantleff-Dunn, & Thompson, 1999).

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The influence of parental comments on disordered eating seems to be mediated by a number of variables, with body dissatisfaction as one of the most frequently investigated (Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005; Dunkley, Wertheim, & Paxton, 2001; Rodgers, Paxton, et al., 2009). Several studies reporting direct relationships between parental comments and offspring's body dissatisfaction, suggest body dissatisfaction as a risk factor in the development of disordered eating (Hanna & Bond, 2006; Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Kluck, 2010; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006; Rodgers, Paxton, et al., 2009; Shaw, Stice, & Springer, 2004; Vincent & McCabe, 2000). Recent findings further support the mediating role of body dissatisfaction, particularly for the effects of negative parental comments, on disordered eating (Compeau & Ambwani, 2013; Rodgers, Paxton, et al., 2009). A comprehensive discussion of parental comments, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating can be found in Rodgers and Chabrol's (2009) systematic review.

Although numerous studies have examined active parental influence on disordered eating, existing findings focused predominantly on female adolescents and young adults, as body dissatisfaction and disordered eating concerns are often considered to be female concerns (Rodgers, Paxton, et al., 2009). However, emerging evidence points towards an increasing prevalence of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating in males (Dakanalis et al., 2015; Halliwell & Harvey, 2006; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; Rodgers, Paxton, et al., 2009). In addition, previous studies of parental comments largely utilised either the cumulative socio-cultural model, focusing on the combined parental influence, or the gender-linked transmission model, focusing on same gender parent-child influence, overlooking the unique influence of each parent (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005; Wertheim, Mee, & Schutz, 1999; Wertheim, Paxton, Schutz, & Muir, 1997). There is considerable evidence for both the gender-linked transmission and cumulative sociocultural model, though much of the work has been with females (Cooley, Toray, Wang, & Valdez, 2008; Corning, Gondoli, Bucchianeri, & Salafia, 2010; Elfhag & Linné, 2005; Snoek, van Strien, Janssens, & Engels, 2009; Wertheim et al., 2002).

In a review of the literature on body dissatisfaction, including 36 studies exploring cultural differences in body dissatisfaction, Holmqvist and Frisén (2010) found that body dissatisfaction differs culturally and is more prevalent in Westernised cultures. Likewise, cultural differences in disordered eating have been reported (Pike, Hoek, & Dunne, 2014). Despite these, to the authors' knowledge there is no existing study exploring the influence of parental comments on disordered eating in an Asian population. Thus, there is a need to explore if the current knowledge in this area is similarly applicable to an Asian context (Tiggemann, 2015).

The island state Singapore, for example, provides an ideal setting to investigate these issues. Singapore (population approximately 5.5 million) includes different local ethnic groups with a sizeable number of foreign national residents (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2014). It is a multi-lingual and multi-religious country with a highly educated and affluent population. Like other East Asian countries, Confucian ideas, such as a strong sense of interdependence within the family, and living with parents and siblings in an extended family until marriage, still prevail (Tan, Choo, Doshi, Lim, & Kua, 2004). It is thus typical in Singaporean families, even those with both parents working, for mothers take on more of a nurturing role while fathers are the disciplinarians.

The prevalence of disordered eating and eating disorders in Singapore is largely unknown. However, it has been established that the presentation of such disorders to mental health services is rising, consistent with patterns observed in other Asian countries such as Japan (Tan, Karim, Lee, Goh, & Lee, 2013). The last known review of eating disorders in Singapore by Ung (2003) found the

prevalence and psychopathology of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction in Singaporean young women very similar to Western societies. This similarity has been attributed to the increasing 'Westernisation' (based on English being spoken as the main language at home) of the Singaporean society (Ung, 2003). In light of this, it can be expected that the influence of parental comments about body shape, weight, and eating habits on disordered eating in Singapore would be similar to past findings with Western samples.

Although the literature of the influence of parental comments on disordered eating and body dissatisfaction is established in Western cultures, there is a need to replicate these findings in Asian samples with both young women and men. Thus, the present study aims to explore the influence of parental comments regarding body shape, weight, and eating habits on body dissatisfaction and disordered eating in Singaporean young adults. Following Ung's (2003) finding that the psychopathology of eating disorders in Singapore is very similar to Western societies, it was hypothesised that young women would report higher levels of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, and perceive more parental comments than young men. Furthermore, significant associations between different categories of parental comments (i.e., negative, positive, and importance and comparison comments) with disordered eating and body dissatisfaction will be observed. Negative comments, and importance and comparison comments were hypothesised to be positively related to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. Positive parental comments, a potential protective factor, were hypothesised to be inversely related to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. Finally, body dissatisfaction was hypothesised to mediate the relationship between parental comments and disordered eating in young adults with gender moderating the links between them.

Method

Participants

Participants were 383 young adults (118 males and 265 females) in Singapore between the age of 18 and 25 years ($M = 21.2$, $SD = 1.9$) with BMI scores ranging from 14.69 to 44.06 ($M = 20.63$, $SD = 3.52$) for females and 16.65 to 33.66 ($M = 22.52$, $SD = 3.33$) for males. The ethnic composition of the sample was 95% Asian (64% Chinese, 18% Indian, 13% other Asian ethnicity), 4% Caucasian, and 1% other ethnicities. Seventy-one percent of participants were still residing with their parents.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee and participants were recruited via an online invitation. Consenting participants completed a set of questionnaires, and received undergraduate Psychology course credit and a debrief of the study's aims upon completion.

Measures

Parental comments. Three dimensions of parental comments regarding body shape, weight, and eating habits (negative, positive, and importance and comparison) were assessed via a 36-item 5-point Likert scale developed by Rodgers, Faure, and Chabrol (2009), building on Gross and Nelson's (2000) scale. Participants rated the frequency of 18 statements made by their fathers and mothers separately with higher scores indicating higher perceived frequency of each parental comments dimension. The seven-item Negative Comments subscale contained negative statements about the young adult's body shape, weight, and eating habits; for example "You need to lose weight". The five-item Positive Comments

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