



Sociocultural influences on strategies to lose weight, gain weight, and increase muscles among ten cultural groups



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ABSTRACT

This study determined how sociocultural messages to change one's body are perceived by adolescents from different cultural groups. In total, 4904 adolescents, including Australian, Chilean, Chinese, Indo-Fijian, Indigenous Fijian, Greek, Malaysian, Chinese Malaysian, Tongans in New Zealand, and Tongans in Tonga, were surveyed about messages from family, peers, and the media to lose weight, gain weight, and increase muscles. Groups were best differentiated by family pressure to gain weight. Girls were more likely to receive the messages from multiple sociocultural sources whereas boys were more likely to receive the messages from the family. Some participants in a cultural group indicated higher, and others lower, levels of these sociocultural messages. These findings highlight the differences in sociocultural messages across cultural groups, but also that adolescents receive contrasting messages within a cultural group. These results demonstrate the difficulty in representing a particular message as being characteristic of each cultural group.

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Introduction

Sociocultural influences have been shown in an extensive body of research to predict adolescents' body image, strategies to both lose and gain weight, and strategies to increase muscles (Smolak, 2009). In a comprehensive review of the literature, Smolak demonstrated that parents (both mothers and fathers), peers, and media played a central role in the body image and eating behaviors of adolescents. The mechanisms whereby this occurred included social comparisons, internalisation of the thin/muscular ideal, teasing, and modeling. These findings were consistent with the Tripartite Influence Model, which refers to the important role of the above factors in shaping body image and eating behaviors (van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Coovert, 2002).

Most of the research on sociocultural influences has been conducted on samples of adolescent boys and girls from Western countries (Ricciardelli, 2012; Wertheim & Paxton, 2012). However, Anderson-Fye (2009) focussed on how the above sociocultural factors that shape body image vary from one cultural group to another. In particular, she cited evidence to suggest that girls from an Asian background in Western countries reported high levels of disordered eating. Consistent with this finding, adolescent girls from Japan

(Pike & Mizushima, 2005), China (Sing & Lee, 2000), Singapore (Ung, 2003), Hong Kong (Ngai, Lee, & Lee, 2000), Thailand (Tsai, Curbow, & Heinberg, 2003), the Philippines (Lorenzo, Lavori, & Lock, 2002), and India (Shroff & Thompson, 2004) have all reported high levels of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. Generally speaking, these studies did not investigate the factors related to these problematic attitudes and behaviors. However, Anderson-Fye proposed that body and eating concerns in Asian countries may be due to increasing Westernisation in these countries (in particular through the media) and fear of becoming fat. Further, the above studies have been conducted among adolescent girls and the extent to which they apply to boys has not been investigated.

The above literature has primarily focussed on cultures that adopt the "thin ideal" for females, although the ideal body for males is less clear, as it has not been a focus of the research. However, for some cultures, a large body size is valued. Males and females from Pacific Island countries view a large body as signifying wealth and status (McCabe et al., 2011). Body image concerns and eating disorders in Pacific Island countries have been thought to be rare, primarily due to the focus in these societies on a large body size (Anderson-Fye, 2009). In fact, the major concern among health professionals in these countries has been obesity (Swinburn et al., 2011). In addition to concerns about obesity in Pacific Island communities, recent evidence suggests that among Indo-Fijian girls there is increasing evidence of anorexia and bulimic symptoms (Becker, Burwell, Gilman, Herzog, & Hamburg, 2002) as well as a

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high prevalence of binge eating (Becker, Burwell, Navara, & Gilman, 2003). Increases in these eating disordered symptoms may be due to the increasing numbers of Western television programs being screened in Fiji.

There has been limited research that has examined body change strategies and the sociocultural influences on these strategies among adolescents from the Pacific Islands (Ricciardelli, McCabe, Williams, & Thompson, 2007). Recently, McCabe et al. (2011) reported on a series of qualitative and quantitative studies among adolescent boys and girls in Fiji and Tonga, as well as Tongans living in New Zealand. The results of these studies demonstrated that messages from parents, peers, and the media impact on the type of body valued by adolescent boys and girls in each of these cultural groups. These influences were also shown to shape the type and volume of food consumed by adolescents, as well as their level of physical activity.

In a review of the role of ethnicity and culture on body image and disordered eating among males, Ricciardelli et al. (2007) found substantial variability in relation to both disordered eating and strategies to increase muscles across cultural groups. The extent of these strategies seems to be related to the level of exposure to Western media, and so the level of endorsement of the thin ideal for females and muscular body form for males. If Asian adolescents adopt these ideals, they appear to be particularly at risk of both disordered eating and strategies to increase muscles (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002). This is of significant concern for males, given that the bodies of Asian males are generally smaller than those of White males, and so Ricciardelli et al. (2007) proposed that they may be more likely to engage in extreme behaviors in order to change the size and shape of their body. In relation to findings among girls, the literature seems to suggest that there is an increase in eating disorders among girls in Asian countries (Ung, 2003). Further, Mellor et al. (2009) found that Malay and Indian adolescent girls in Malaysia were more likely to engage in both strategies to lose weight and also increase muscles than Chinese girls in Malaysia. These behaviors were primarily related to a greater internalisation of the thin ideal among Malay and Indian adolescents, as well as greater perceived pressure from both the family and peers to lose weight.

The current study used linear discriminant function analyses to determine the nature of sociocultural messages among adolescent boys and girls from ten different cultural groups. The importance of this study is that it examined messages from family, peers and the media in relation to losing weight, gaining weight and increasing muscles. A further novel aspect of the study is that it recruited adolescents from cultures that had traditionally endorsed either a large or thin ideal body. It was expected that Tongan and Indigenous Fijian boys and girls would be differentiated from other groups by the higher levels of messages from all sociocultural agents to increase weight, and that boys from these cultures would also be differentiated from other groups by high levels of messages to increase muscles. For all the other groups of girls, we expected high levels of the messages from all three sociocultural agents to lose weight, with similar levels of such messages across different cultures. It was also expected that for boys from cultures other than Tongan and Indigenous Fijian, there would be high levels of messages from all three agents to increase muscles.

Method

Participants

In total, 4904 adolescents from 10 cultural groups took part in this study, including 694 Australian (368 females, 326 males), 318 Chileans (215 females, 103 males), 518 Chinese (299 females,

219 males), 627 Indigenous Fijian (337 females, 290 males), 614 Indo-Fijian (331 females, 283 males), 641 Greek (339 females, 302 males), 100 Malaysian (56 females, 44 males), 333 Chinese Malaysian (180 females, 153 males), 461 Tongans in New Zealand (288 females, 173 males), and 598 Tongan adolescents (297 females, 301 males). The average age of study participants was 15.0 years ($SD=1.7$) and the average body mass index (BMI) was 21.8 ($SD=4.5$). Slightly more than half were female (54.3%). There were differences across cultural groups in BMI, but it was beyond the scope of this study to examine the role of BMI in the nature of the sociocultural messages within or across the different cultural groups. Participants in each country were drawn from high schools in urban locations across a range of socioeconomic areas. They ranged in age from 12 to 18 years, and the mean age and proportion of females did not vary across cultural groups.

Materials

Sociocultural influences measure. An extension of the Sociocultural Influences on Body Image and Body Change Questionnaire (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001) was utilised to assess perceived pressure regarding three separate body change behaviors (lose weight, gain weight, and increase muscles) from the following sources: (1) adult males in the family, (2) adult females in the family, (3) older brothers or male cousins, (4) older sisters or female cousins, (5) male peers, (6) female peers, and (7) the media. The decision to include items reflecting influence from cousins was based on a recognition that extended family members are likely to exert influence in some of the cultural groups sampled. There were three items from each source for each body change behavior (e.g., media, adult males, etc.), reflecting common methods of sociocultural influence: telling, teasing, and modeling (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Adolescents were required to rate each item (e.g., ‘Do adult females in your family tell you to lose weight?’) on a 5-point Likert where 1 = *never*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *often*, 4 = *almost always* and 5 = *always*. Higher scores were indicative of higher levels of perceived sociocultural pressure regarding the particular body change behavior. All scales were translated and back translated for the adolescents who did not complete their schooling in English: Chilean, Chinese, Malaysian, and Tongans in Tonga. All other groups completed the scales in English. The survey also included questions on the actual nature of body change strategies adopted by adolescents but these data will be presented in a different paper.

Although we initially intended to test the relative contribution of each of the seven sources of sociocultural influence (as listed above), preliminary analyses revealed high correlations among the familial sources and also for the two peer sources, suggesting redundancy in these subdivisions. As such, the scale was divided into three sources (family, peers, and media), consistent with the three sources of influence specified in the Tripartite Influence Model (van den Berg et al., 2002). Internal consistency estimates for the nine measures of sociocultural influences used in the current study ranged from .52 (peer pressure to gain weight for Chilean girls) to .93 (family pressure to increase muscles for Malay boys) (see Table 1 for the nine subscales). Only two of the nine subscales had coefficient alpha of less than .65.

Procedure

Permission to undertake the study was obtained from the University Ethics Committee and appropriate local ethics committees. In each of the countries, principals from local schools were approached to provide permission for the students from their school to participate in the study. All adolescents completed the

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