



Brief research report

Perceptions of parental attitudes toward body and eating: Associations with body image among Black and White college women

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ABSTRACT

This study examined Black and White young women's perceptions of parental body- and eating-related attitudes and behaviors from growing up and the relations of these parental factors with their current body image. Female undergraduates (97 Black women, 179 White women) completed questionnaires of perceptions of parental attitudes/behaviors related to body image and eating and of their current body image, operationalized as weight/shape concern. Results indicated that perceived parental communication was more strongly related to body image than perceived parental modeling in both ethnic groups, and that there were some differences in how frequently Black and White women reported encountering specific maternal messages about the body or eating. Perceived parental modeling and communication constructs were related to body image in similar ways for both ethnic groups after controlling for BMI. Future research directions are discussed.

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Introduction

Factors influencing body image require elucidation. Not only is body dissatisfaction distressing in its own right, but meta-analytic work (based on primarily White samples) has highlighted a robust link between body dissatisfaction and eating pathology (Stice, 2002), and among Black adolescent females there is evidence that body dissatisfaction is positively correlated with disordered eating (White & Grilo, 2005). At the same time, meta-analytic work finds that Black females exhibit less body dissatisfaction than White females (Grabe & Hyde, 2006), although the effect size is small ($d = .29$). Interestingly, while differences in body dissatisfaction in these ethnic groups are most pronounced during the college years (early 20s), there has been a trend of decreased ethnic differences in weight dissatisfaction (Roberts, Cash, Feingold, & Johnson, 2006).

While various factors have been examined to understand this apparent, but perhaps diminishing, discrepancy in body dissatisfaction (e.g., female body preferences of Black and White males, media representation), much less is known about the influence of parents' messages regarding body image and eating. This is important since attitudes and behaviors related to one's body can be learned via parental modeling, such as a parent expressing concern about her own weight, and by parental communication, such as a parent expressing concern about her daughter's weight (Wertheim, Martin, Prior, Sanson, & Smart, 2002).

Parental messages and their influence on young women's body image could theoretically operate in different ways in Black and White young women. For example, the greater acceptance of larger and more diverse body types in the Black community (Parker, Nichter, Nichter, Vuckovic, Sims, & Ritenbaugh, 1995) may mean that Black parents are less likely to pressure their daughters to lose weight, which may protect daughters from negative body image. However, given concerns about obesity and related health risks in the Black population (Hedley, Ogden, Johnson, Carroll, Curtin, & Flegal, 2004), parents may exert pressure on their daughters to lose weight which may have implications for their body image. The current study examined parental body- and eating-related attitudes and behaviors as perceived by Black and White young women from their childhood/adolescence and examined the relations between these parental factors and current body image.

Most of the research on parental attitudes and behaviors related to the body and eating has focused on primarily White samples. These studies have found more consistent and stronger effects of parental communication (e.g., encouragement to lose weight) on daughters' body image than parental modeling (Baker, Whisman, & Brownell, 2000; Rodgers & Chabrol, 2009). For example, using a primarily Caucasian sample, Baker et al. (2000) found college females' perceptions of parental criticism were more strongly associated with their attitudes toward their bodies than were young women's perceptions of parental modeling. Additionally, limited research has generally found support for greater maternal than paternal influence (Baker et al., 2000; Wertheim et al., 2002).

Limited existing research examining these sorts of parental influences in Black female samples has generally found similar

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patterns (Brown, Schreiber, McMahon, Crawford, & Ghee, 1995; Thompson & Sargent, 2000). For example, Thompson and Sargent (2000) found that increased weight concern was associated with the perception of high levels of maternal criticism about childhood appearance for both Black and White adult women. However, in a community sample Striegel-Moore, Wilfley, Caldwell, Needham, and Brownell (1996) found that, among Black and White women dieters, Black women were less likely to report being criticized by a parent for being overweight.

The current study

Parental attitudes and behaviors toward the body and eating, such as parental weight loss efforts and expressed concerns about children's weight, may model or reinforce values that increase risk for negative body image. The current exploratory study sampled a group of Black and White female undergraduates with the following aims in each ethnic group: (1) to examine perceptions of parental attitudes/behaviors about the body and eating while growing up; and (2) to determine the associations between these parental factors and young women's current body image, operationalized here as weight and shape concern.

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were 276 women attending a large Midwestern university with students from both urban and rural settings; 97 (35%) self-reported as African American (Black) and 179 (65%) as Caucasian non-Hispanic (White). Women were recruited, without selection criteria other than self-identifying as Black or White, from Introductory Psychology classes as well as campus-wide (e.g., fliers, listservs). Mean age was 19.04 years ($SD=1.59$ years) for Black women and 18.58 years ($SD=1.06$ years) for White women. Highest parental education attained, a proxy for socio-economic status, was 15.80 years ($SD=2.81$) for Black women and 16.42 years ($SD=2.57$) for White women.

After providing written consent, participants completed a set of questionnaires that included the topics of body image, family experiences, and demographics. Questionnaire completion occurred in groups of 5–20 and lasted from 45 to 60 min. Participants were compensated with course credit or a gift certificate to a local mall. This study was approved by the university's human ethics committee.

Measures

Perceptions of parental attitudes/behaviors related to body image and eating

Participants completed a questionnaire created for this study regarding how frequently their parents engaged in certain behaviors or displayed certain attitudes, all related to the body or eating. All questions were in reference to when the participant was "growing up," which was defined as "before you came to college," and items referred separately to mothers and fathers. Six questions were about parental attitudes/behaviors geared to her/himself, intended to reflect parental modeling (e.g., mother was on a diet), and six were about parental attitudes/behaviors geared toward the participant, intended to reflect parental communication (e.g., father worried about my weight). Participants responded using a 1 = *never* to 5 = *almost always* scale.¹

Body image

Body image was assessed using the Weight Concern and Shape Concern subscales of the Eating Disorder Examination-Questionnaire (EDE-Q; Fairburn & Beglin, 1994) with participants reporting on the past 28 days using a 7-point scale. The Weight Concern subscale taps into weight dissatisfaction and over-valuation of weight in self-evaluation; the Shape Concern subscale assesses these aspects related to shape. To more comprehensively capture body image related to size and shape, and given research suggesting that these two EDE-Q subscales reflect one factor (Peterson et al., 2007), we combined these two measures to create a weight/shape concern subscale (items averaged to obtain a final score). Reliability and validity are well-established for the EDE-Q for White females (Black & Wilson, 1996; Luce & Crowther, 1999), with emerging psychometric support for Black women (Bardone-Cone & Boyd, 2007). In this study, alpha was .93 for Black women and .94 for White women.

Body mass index

Body mass index (BMI) was computed based on self-reported weight and height, and provides an index of relative weight.

Results

Descriptive data

For descriptive purposes, Table 1 displays, separately for Black and White women, the proportion who endorsed the parental items as occurring frequently (defined as "often" or "almost always"), along with comparisons of these proportions. A pattern of ethnic differences emerged in the endorsement of frequent maternal modeling/communication.

Black women had lower levels of weight/shape concern than White women, $t(274) = -3.76$, $p < .001$ (Black women: $M=2.19$, $SD=1.60$; White women: $M=2.91$, $SD=1.48$), and a larger average BMI, $t(134) = 3.80$, $p < .001$ (Black women: $M=24.18$ kg/m², $SD=4.66$; White women: $M=22.22$ kg/m², $SD=2.79$). Of the Black women, 13.4% reported what are generally considered clinically significant levels on the combined EDE-Q subscales reflecting weight/shape concern (≥ 4 ; Mond, Hay, Rodgers, & Owen, 2006); most women in this group were overweight (BMI ≥ 25 ; Bjorntorp, 2002). In contrast, 24.6% of White women had clinically significant levels of weight/shape concern, with most falling in the normal weight category.

Factor analysis of perceived parental attitudes/behaviors items

Given the exploratory nature of this study, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the parental items using oblimin rotation, separately in the Black and Whites samples. In both samples, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was moderate per Field (2009): .65 and .66 for the White and Black samples, respectively. Further, the correlations between items were adequate for factor analysis per significant Bartlett's tests of sphericity (White sample: $\chi^2 = 895.97$, $p < .001$; Black sample: $\chi^2 = 491.68$, $p < .001$). In an initial factor analysis, the face-valid modeling items all loaded onto one factor and the face-valid communication items onto another for the White women. For the Black women, the same pattern of modeling and communication items

¹ In some cases, participants did not have a parent they could report on because a parent was not present in their lives while growing up (e.g., left the family, deceased).

All the Black women in this sample ($n=97$) provided data on mothers, and 93 of them provided data on fathers. Of the White women, 178 of 179 provided data on mothers and 177 provided data on fathers.

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