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The role of the "Healthy Weight" discourse in body image and eating concerns: An extension of sociocultural theory

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Sociocultural models of body image and eating concerns have highlighted the role of the social discourse in promoting the pursuit of the thin-ideal. Recently, another weight-focused social discourse has gained ground, focused on the goal of maintaining body weight within the boundaries of a weight-range defined as "Healthy." This discourse is somewhat different to the promotion of the thin-ideal; however, it might also be implicated in the development of body image and eating concerns. The present study aimed to extend sociocultural theories of the development of body image and eating concerns by (1) proposing a theoretical model accounting for pressure to maintain a "Healthy Weight", and (2) reviewing the existing evidence for the pathways included in this model. In the proposed model, pressure to maintain a Healthy Weight leads to the internalization of anti-fat attitudes and the need to control weight as well as beliefs in the controllability of weight through diet and exercise. These beliefs may then lead to body preoccupation and disordered eating. The extant literature provides initial support for these relationships; however, empirical testing of this model is necessary to determine its usefulness as an explanatory model and in providing intervention targets for future prevention and intervention efforts.

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1. Introduction

Sociocultural theories of the development of body image and eating disorders have highlighted the causal role of the social discourse glorifying thinness and vilifying overweight (Levine & Murnen, 2009). This discourse places pressure upon individuals to attain an unrealistically slender, lean, toned and muscular ideal, which can result in body

image dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Rodgers, Chabrol, & Paxton, 2011; Rodgers, Ganchou, Franko, & Chabrol, 2012; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). More recently, however, another discourse has been gaining ground. This discourse is subtly, yet importantly, different in its overt weight-related message. While still extoling thinness and vilifying overweight, this more recent discourse does not explicitly promote an unattainable body ideal. In contrast, the emphasis is on the maintenance of a socially responsible weight falling within certain standardized indices considered to represent a "Healthy Weight" (Saguy & Gruys, 2010). The aim of this paper is to present a theoretical model of the role of this discourse in the

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development of body image and eating concerns grounded within sociocultural theory, and to examine the empirical support for this new model.

2. The usefulness of a model describing the role of the Healthy Weight discourse in the development of body image and eating concerns

Sociocultural theories of body image and eating disorders are *critical*, in that they aim to identify the forces that maintain and profit from cultural movements (Bordo, 2003). Through this lens, work examining the discourse promoting the achievement of an excessively slender body (thin-ideal discourse) has highlighted several important points. First, the pressures to achieve the thin-ideal are seen as emanating from the profit-oriented beauty and fitness industry, with a clear disinterest in health (Thompson et al., 1999). In addition, the motivation to pursue the thin-ideal is imparted through equating thinness with happiness, and social and romantic success as well as culturally valued traits such as self-control (Bordo, 2003). Thus, the thin-ideal discourse links in with the larger Western quest for self-improvement, pursuit of individual happiness and gain, and overarching capitalism (Hesse-Biber, 1996). Second, the physical appearance promoted by the thin-ideal discourse is recognized as *unrealistic for most* individuals, leading to the implicit endorsement of extreme and harmful behaviors as a means of achieving it. Thus, while exercise and diet foods are promoted as a baseline, other more extreme methods such as fasting, cosmetic surgery, and the ingestion or injection of dangerous substances are also endorsed (Saraceni & Russell-Mayhew, 2007). While the thin-ideal discourse advocates that this unrealistic appearance could be achieved by all, it also acknowledges that this requires effort and the consumption of services and specialized products - an effort then compensated by social and material rewards.

The critical examination of this discourse has led to the development etiological models of body image and eating concerns, and the creation and dissemination of efficacious intervention and prevention programs (Stice, Shaw, & Marti, 2007; Stice, Shaw, Becker, & Rohde, 2008). Such models describe how societal messages and values are internalized and shape individual attitudes that then influence behaviors. One important contribution is the concept of the internalization of the thin-ideal (Thompson & Stice, 2001), that is the incorporation of the discourse as a personal belief that the thin-ideal should indeed be pursued. Internalization has been shown to be a critical mechanism of the influence of the thin-ideal discourse on individual attitudes and behaviors (Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005). In this way, models of the development of body image and eating concerns highlighting the role of the thin-ideal discourse posit that messages from the social environment promoting the thin-ideal are internalized by individuals, leading to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating.

In addition to the thin-ideal discourse, a discourse focused on the maintenance of a socially responsible weight has recently emerged. This discourse highlights the importance of maintaining a weight within the normed boundaries, of what has been defined by the biomedical field as a "Healthy Weight." To date, however, while the Healthy Weight discourse has been the object of critical analysis in various fields (Greenhalgh, 2012; Saguy & Gruys, 2010), sociocultural theories of body image and eating concerns have not considered its role as distinct from that of the thin-ideal discourse. While not entirely separate from the thin-ideal discourse, the Healthy Weight discourse presents some specificities worth considering. First, in contrast to the thin-ideal discourse, the Healthy Weight discourse is conveyed by health-related institutions and professions, as well as gaining ground among the mainstream media (Greenhalgh, 2012), and aims to be health-promoting by emphasizing that lower weight is associated with lower health risk (Park, Falconer, Viner, & Kinra, 2012). In addition, the Healthy Weight discourse highlights the economic burden caused by

overweight (Withrow & Alter, 2011). Thus, it aligns with the wider emphasis on personal responsibility and citizenship. A Healthy Weight is not pursued for personal but collective gain, and failing to do so concomitantly places a burden on all.

Second, it is estimated that only 20% of individuals succeed in maintaining weight loss over the long term (Wing & Phelan, 2005) and that even the most effective interventions often result in modest weight loss (Franz et al., 2007; Wu, Gao, Chen, & Van Dam, 2009). Thus, the body shape and size promoted by the Healthy Weight ideal is *unrealistic for some*, which is an important distinction from the thin-ideal discourse, whereby the body ideal is unrealistic for most. However, it is also different from the current body weight *of most*, given present rates of overweight (Flegal, Carroll, Kit, & Ogden, 2012). While the Healthy Weight discourse may suggest extreme measures in some cases (such as bariatric surgery) to achieve the healthy body size, its main focus is lifestyle with a heavy emphasis on nutrition and physical activity (Kim & Anne Willis, 2007). This discourse proposes that a Healthy Weight will be readily achieved or maintained if behavioral changes are made. Thus, in contrast to the thin-ideal discourse, it emphasizes the accessibility of the Healthy Weight and the malleability of body weight as a result of health-oriented lifestyle changes. Critically, however, as previously mentioned, not only is this body weight unrealistic for some, it has also been suggested that the lifestyle changes emphasized by this discourse may be harder to achieve and sustain for certain individuals, or less effective in the long-term than proposed (Curioni & Lourenco, 2005; Hebden, Chey, & Allman-Farinelli, 2012). Thus, it is likely that individuals who fail to engage in these lifestyle changes, or find them unsuccessful or difficult to maintain over time, may feel increasingly unhappy with their body size and resort to more extreme and unhealthy forms of body change strategies, potentially resulting in disordered eating. Therefore, the Healthy Weight discourse may be associated with increased body image and eating concerns.

Given the parallels, yet important differences, between the thin-ideal and Healthy Weight discourses, but most critically the potential for this new discourse to result in body image and eating concerns, it seems fitting to use the sociocultural framework to help further our understanding of its impact on these concerns. A sociocultural model accounting for the effects of the Healthy Weight discourse on body image and eating concerns would examine the role of messages promoting Healthy Weight on individual attitudes and behaviors (Fig. 1). Two potential mechanisms are suggested by the above analysis of this discourse: (1) the internalization of anti-fat attitudes (self-and other-directed) and the need to control weight to maintain a Healthy Weight; (2) the belief that lifestyle factors such as diet and physical activity play a large role in weight control.

3. A review of the evidence for the proposed model

While the model presented in Fig. 1 has not been empirically tested, emerging evidence exists for the relationships between its main elements: sociocultural messages regarding the importance of controlling weight and maintaining a "Healthy Weight"; the internalization of anti-fat attitudes (self- and other-directed) and the need to control weight; beliefs in the controllability of weight through diet and exercise; and body image and eating concerns. Notably, the proposed model shares some conceptual overlap with understandings of the relationships between weight stigma and well-being proposed within the Health At Every Size framework (Tylka et al., 2014). However, our proposed model aims to go beyond this previous one by capturing the effects of the broader social discourse surrounding weight control, by examining the effects of messages from individuals and the media, as well as higher-level institutions and policies. In addition, the proposed model specifically considers the effects of the focus on diet and exercise as means of achieving the Healthy Weight on poor body image, disordered eating, and excessive exercise outcomes.