THE STATE OF BODY IMAGE RESEARCH IN CLINICAL AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Body image has become an increasingly important area of research, adopting concepts and using methodologies from a number of fields of psychology, but with particular implications for social and clinical psychology. The present paper will provide a brief commentary on the papers included in this Special Issue: To clarify how they inform us and what remains to be investigated. As a set, the papers well exemplify current trends in body image research and contribute to an increasingly complex and sophisticated understanding of the phenomenon of body image.

This Special Issue on Body Image provides a fine illustration of both the commonality and diversity of research in this field which is situated at the interface of social and clinical psychology. The articles range across very different methodologies and different foci of attention. As a set, they indicate the field is a very healthy one. And like all good studies, they raise just as many questions as they answer. My task, here, is to offer a brief commentary on each of the contributions in turn, to identify any such questions and directions for future research, and to situate the findings in the context of the field as a whole. Finally, I attempt to draw together common themes running through the papers.

BROWN AND DITTMAR

Brown and Dittmar take as their starting point the finding that unrealistically thin models presented in the media generally have a negative impact on women’s body image (as indicated in the meta-analysis of Groesz, Levine & Murnen, 2002). The paper extends this idea to examin-
ing when and how this effect occurs. Given the observation that not all young women suffer extreme weight preoccupation and only few develop clinical eating disorders, one crucial question becomes who is most vulnerable to these idealized media images. The study confirms that these media images increase weight–related anxiety to the extent that women have internalized the societally proscribed thin ideal, and supports Groesz et al.'s overall conclusion of particular vulnerability for women with significant body issues. This suggests a downward spiral in which existing negative body image is further exacerbated by exposure to idealized media images. One task for the field as a whole is to clarify the conceptual and temporal relationship between the important variables of internalization of the thin ideal (Heinberg, Thompson & Stormer, 1995; Thompson & Stice, 2001) and appearance schemas or investment (Cash & Labarge, 1996; Cash, Melnyk & Hrabosky, 2004), which appear to form the core of this vulnerability to media content.

The identification of level of attention as a salient variable is a novel contribution, with the study demonstrating both that conditions of high attention increase body–focused anxiety, but that even peripheral processing has effects. Certainly levels of attention vary in everyday life. This is allied to other aspects worthy of investigation, in particular, are there differential effects for explicit and implicit presentation of thin ideals (e.g., in fashion magazines as opposed to television sitcoms) or for conscious versus automatic or unconscious processing (Henderson–King, Henderson–King & Hoffmann, 2001)? The “waiting room” methodology of Turner, Hamilton, Jacobs, Angood and Dwyer (1997) warrants development as a way to tackle some of these questions.

Finally, the study found that the effect of thin ideal images (moderated by internalization) was fully mediated by appearance schema activation. To my mind this question of how media effects occur is a very important, but relatively, neglected one. The underlying processes can be investigated indirectly by manipulating instructions or conditions under which stimuli are viewed (as for level of attention above), and directly by explicitly assessing the hypothesised process (here schema activation). The latter clearly requires some kind of reactive state measure—not some stable individual difference measure (e.g. internalization of thin ideals) that should theoretically remain unaffected by single media exposures.

Although research is making substantial progress on the when and who and how of media effects, one remaining question articulated by Polivy and Herman (2004) is why do people voluntarily expose themselves to media images. Put simply, if reading fashion magazines makes women and girls feel bad about their bodies, then why do they do so? Some answers that have been suggested thus far include social learning
motivation, that is women and girls read magazines to gain information about beauty, grooming, and style (Levine & Smolak, 1996), and self-enhancement motives—some women feel inspired and experience pleasurable fantasy in response to idealized media images (Mills, Polivy, Herman & Tiggemann, 2002). Other hypotheses worthy of investigation include possible differential effects on general mood versus body-specific cognitions, and immediate versus cumulative or longer-term effects.

ENGELN-MADDOX

Using a novel thought-listing procedure, Engeln-Maddox examined women's cognitive processing of print advertisements featuring images of highly attractive female models. They found that participants commonly generated counterarguments and negative (upward) social comparisons in response to body advertisements (thin model in swimwear). In contrast, positive outcome social comparisons were relatively rare. It would be interesting to see comparison data for the advertisements featuring models' faces as this would begin to disentangle the confound between thinness and attractiveness identified by Quinlivan and Leary (this volume).

Engeln-Maddox found that the tendency to make comparisons in response to idealized thin images of female beauty was related to both internalization and body dissatisfaction. In contrast, the generation of counterarguments was not related to any measure. It needs to be remembered that the study sampled women's naturally occurring, or typical ways, of responding to idealized images. Logic would dictate that the dispositional measures of body dissatisfaction and internalization would temporally predate women's specific thoughts in the specific situation. Thus this is a very different design from studies that experimentally manipulate counterarguments by explicitly teaching or persuading women to make such counterarguments, which generally have proven successful in reducing body dissatisfaction (e.g., Stice, Mazotti, Weibel & Agras, 2000).

One of the difficulties inherent in counterarguments as a strategy is that women and girls may already have detailed knowledge about commonly used computer distortion techniques such as airbrushing. In particular, not only do adolescent girls demonstrate a clear understanding that media-portrayed images are unrealistic and often manipulated, but they are also able to articulate in a very sophisticated and analytic manner the sociocultural pressures involved in the construction of their own body views which lead them to still want to be thin (Tiggemann, Gardiner & Slater, 2000). As researchers, we need to remember that, far from
being foolish, the adoption of the thin ideal for oneself is in fact quite sensible in a society which values appearance so much and in which being thin (and attractive) does confer considerable social advantage.

While media literacy interventions include a key component of critical evaluation and de-construction of media images, the successful programs tend to go beyond this. They also include both media activism and advocacy (Levine, Piran & Stoddard, 1999). Thus a level of personal involvement and empowerment may be necessary before girls can relinquish the thin ideal.

**QUINLIVAN AND LEARY**

Based on self-verification and self-enhancement theories, Quinlivan and Leary (this volume) investigated the underlying motives for the discrepancies between some women’s perceptions of themselves (self-appraisal) and of how others see them (reflected appraisal). Their clever and creative experimental protocol involved false feedback from an assumed observer. Overall (with a few exceptions), the results supported a self-enhancement perspective, where the discrepancy reflects a self-serving tactic for maintaining self-esteem or seeking self-enhancing information. Relatively positive feedback, even when not consistent with self-ratings, produced a positive response. Only participants whose self-appraisals were thinner than their reflected appraisals rated self-congruent feedback as more accurate than social-congruent or idealized feedback, in line with a preference for self-verifying feedback. This pattern illustrates the cognitive-affective independence of self-enhancement and self-verification.

The findings raise the intriguing question as to why do those women who see themselves as heavier than they think others see them rate self-congruent feedback as less accurate than other feedback? The authors suggest that self-appraisals may be susceptible to (perhaps affective) biases that reflected appraisals are not. Another possibility is that such women may be quite accurate in their self-appraisals. They may know how big they “really” are, but also may know strategies on how to dress (e.g., wear dark-coloured pants and skirts) in order to look thinner and more attractive. Hence they expect others to see them (particularly when dressed) in line with their reflected appraisal ratings. Here the feedback (an observer’s view through a one-way mirror) is essentially from a reflected appraisal task. This possibility is also more consistent with the finding that heavier self- than reflected appraisal was associated with lower body dissatisfaction. It would be interesting to replicate the study with some form of more “objective” perceptual feedback, e.g., line beam on wall. In general, as pointed out by Cash and Pruzinsky
(2002), body image researchers might well pay more attention to clothes and other everyday appearance management strategies, over which women have much more direct control than their body size or shape. Finally, the study raises the general question of what is more important psychologically, how you think others see you or how you “really” are?

JONES AND BUCKINGHAM

The paper by Jones and Buckingham (this volume) starts off with a very clear and conceptually integrated overview of the literature on social comparison in media effects in all its complexity. In particular, they challenge the simple assumption underlying most media research that exposure to thin attractive models produces upward comparison that invariably results in negative effects. They remind us that it is possible to obtain both assimilation and contrast effects from upward comparisons and correspondingly, both positive and negative effects on self-evaluation.

The study itself sets out to test self-esteem as a moderator of the effects of appearance-based social comparisons on women’s body esteem. In support, they found a contrast effect for women with low self-esteem, whereby they experienced lower body esteem following an upward comparison to an attractive model (head and shoulders shot) than a downward comparison to an unattractive model. In contrast, high self-esteem subjects demonstrated an assimilation effect, with higher body esteem after upward than downward comparison. This provides another example of a possible inspirational or thinness fantasy effect for some women (Mills et al., 2002).

Body esteem is normally conceptualized as a trait, that is as a stable and consistent disposition of the individual. Here the Body Esteem Scale (devised to assess trait body esteem) has been used as a state measure to assess changes in response to changed conditions. However, there is evidence that body esteem and related constructs are responsive to situational context (Cash, 2002; Tiggemann, 2001). Given this, we need to develop more reactive (state) measures to capture the fluid and dynamic nature of body image in everyday life. I believe that failure to distinguish between trait and state conceptions (and measures) of body image is one of the confusions in the general literature. Finally, it is interesting that participants in the upward comparison condition of the present experiment reported more positive mood (a state measure).

HOSPERS AND JANSEN

The final paper in this volume (Hospers & Jansen) turns to a different subject sample and sets out to investigate why homosexuality is a risk
factor for eating disorders in males. A comparison of young gay and heterosexual Dutch men showed that the homosexual men were thinner, scored higher on body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptomatology, lower on self-esteem and masculinity, and reported more peer pressure. Peer pressure, reflecting the higher value placed upon physical attractiveness, slenderness and masculinity within the gay culture, had a more pronounced effect on body dissatisfaction for gay men.

Studies of groups other than adolescent or young adult women in Western societies (such as men, children, non-Western samples) allow more powerful tests of some of our general models. Body dissatisfaction is likely to be less normative (have greater variability) in these groups, and hence it should be easier for statistical analyses to detect the effects of different predictors. Here it was found that sexual orientation and peer pressure were only indirectly related to eating disorder symptoms, the mediating variables being body dissatisfaction and self-esteem. The central role for body dissatisfaction in determining eating symptoms among men is consistent with the conclusion of Stice's (2002) meta-analysis of longitudinal studies that identifies body dissatisfaction as one of the most consistent and robust risk factors for eating pathology among women. More generally, my reading of the literature indicates that while there are often large differences in mean values on body image variables between different groups (e.g., men and women, different cultures), the relationships between variables usually show a similar pattern.

COMMON THEMES

There are a number of themes that run across this special issue. Each study is broadly conceptualized within a sociocultural framework, which has become the dominant model in the field (Stice, 1994; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). This model maintains that current societal standards for female beauty inordinately emphasise the desirability of thinness, and thinness at a level impossible for most women to achieve by healthy means. Although unrealistic, the thin ideal is nevertheless accepted and internalized by many women. Falling short of this standard then leads to body dissatisfaction and excessive dieting behaviors. These beauty ideals are transmitted by a variety of sociocultural agents; the current papers have focused on the media and peers. Each study, in its own way, both supports this general framework, but also identifies new variables or pathways that show how the picture is more complex.

I commend the authors on two related, particularly noteworthy features that mark the next generation of studies: The use of specific theory
to generate predictions and the explicit testing of specific models. Here we have seen the application of cognitive processing models (Brown & Dittmar), social comparison theory (Engeln-Maddox, Jones & Buckingham), and self-verification and self-enhancement theories (Quinlivan & Leary). Explicit models that were tested included a *moderation* role for internalization (Brown & Dittmar) and self-esteem (Jones & Buckingham), whereby the effect of media images on negative body image is stronger for women with high internalization and low self-esteem; a *mediating* role for schema activation in the effect of media ideals on body image (Brown & Dittmar); and a *mediating* role for body dissatisfaction between gender orientation and eating disorders in men (Hospers & Jansen). To my mind this is very much the way forward. We need to unpack the general model and pose specific questions to delineate and delimit the model.

Finally, with respect to methodology, as a set these studies have developed clever protocols to deliberately minimize demand effects. Plausible cover stories have been carefully constructed concerning the effectiveness of advertising (Brown & Dittmar), lifestyle factors (Engeln-Maddox), or impression formation (Quinlivan & Leary; Jones & Buckingham), and filler items have been included to enhance credibility. Further, most of the papers have adopted a two-phase procedure, whereby initial items are collected some time prior to Phase 2, which is then presented as ostensibly a separate study.

**FINAL COMMENTS**

I think the special issue marks a good beginning to the future of body image research. We need more theory-based predictions, more explicit testing of models, and more clever designs to test new and more sophisticated hypotheses. Essentially more precision and specificity are required to articulate the model of effects as clearly as possible. In addition, we need to acknowledge that correlational, experimental and even longitudinal designs each have their inherent limitations, and need to integrate their findings to form a composite picture. We also need to clarify the conceptual and empirical distinction between related and potentially overlapping constructs (and their corresponding measures) like social comparison, internalization of thin ideals and appearance schemas. The present volume points forward to an increasingly complex and sophisticated understanding of body image as a phenomenon of contemporary significance.
REFERENCES


