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Disordered Eating from Interpersonal Relationships and Body Comparisons

Taylor Dawson

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how women's relationships (with sisters, mothers, female friends and significant others) along with thin ideal media shape beauty ideals and contribute to eating disorders. I studied scholarly articles pertaining to exposure to underweight and healthy weight models and its effect on women. I also examined articles that discussed different types of comparisons that women made on themselves against the female figures in their lives. I examined studies on parental disordered eating and perceived body image. My preliminary conclusion is that women's comparisons in their interpersonal relationships have more of an effect on disordered eating and beauty ideals than thin ideal media. To help with the low self-esteem that creates these negative comparisons, girls should be raised and encouraged to develop a high image of self, but more research is needed on body comparisons to find a way to affectively and successfully correct these negative comparisons with accuracy.

Introduction

Eating disorders like anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating disorder are becoming more and more common in the United States. 20 million women in America suffer from an eating disorder at some point in their lives according to the National Eating Disorders Association. Many people believe that thin ideal media is causing the increase of eating disorders. Another vein of current literature asserts that girls compare themselves to other women, which leads to disordered eating. It is important that we try to minimize, or even eradicate, eating disorders to foster a healthier lifestyle for women. To solve this problem, we need to understand how women's relationships (with sisters, mothers, female friends and significant others) along with thin ideal media shape beauty ideals and contribute to eating disorders. Disordered eating can lead to mental health issues like anxiety, depression and others. Eating disorders can also cause a range of physical health problems from mild anemia and intestinal problems to organ failure, brain damage, and can sometimes lead to death. Although popular media creates an incredibly skewed thin ideal for women, interpersonal relationships are far more detrimental to body image and can lead to disordered eating because women consciously and subconsciously compare themselves to the female figures in their lives which creates low self-esteem and low self-image.

Results/Discussion

Women are always being objectified, as stated by the Objectification Theory; women in Western culture have their worth measured by their appearance. This leads women to subconsciously compare themselves to the women around them. It is somewhat difficult to find quantitative measurements for how much of an effect some of these influences have, but it looks as though relationships (with family and friends) are the biggest contributor to disordered eating.

While sifting through the current literature, I found that the female figures in a girl's life have the most affect on how they view themselves. Women develop a sense of self early in their lives, but have that challenged by the female figures in the lives. Girls compare their bodies to the bodies of their mothers, best female friends, and their sisters closest in age. These negative comparisons lead to low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction.

Conclusion

The thinness of women in media has an effect on women's body dissatisfaction, but not to the extent that most people would expect it to. Even with the constant bombardment of the thin-ideal, body dissatisfaction (which can lead to disordered eating) is not as effected by media as it is by the influences of female family and peers.

Body dissatisfaction from negative comparisons can lead to disordered eating. Negative comparisons are detrimental, but it hard to pinpoint a way to correct this to fix low self-esteem and low self-image. There are some suggestions to foster a body-positive environment in our homes and schools. Body acceptance should be encouraged. Young girls should be taught to love themselves, regardless of what they look like, early on so that they can develop a good self-image and self-worth that will carry them through life and make them strong so there is less of a chance that they will be susceptible to make negative comparisons.

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“Do you think I’m fat?”

