

IS ETHNICITY AN IMPORTANT DISCRIMINATOR OF EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL PHYSIQUE ANXIETY AMONG ADOLESCENT GIRLS?

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Empirical research suggests that socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age, and ethnicity influence specific weight-related concerns and behaviours (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 1999). Body-related concerns are especially prevalent among young women and are heightened during adolescence. It has been suggested that body concerns can lead to anxiety in situations where the body may be judged by others (McAuley & Burman, 1993). Concern about body-specific evaluations by others is referred to as social physique anxiety (SPA; Hart et al., 1989). Limited research examining the complexities of young women's experiences with SPA from culturally different backgrounds has restricted the understanding and theoretical implications associated with the construct. The objective of this study was to look at differences in the experiences of SPA in an ethnically diverse adolescent sample. Forty six girls, aged 13 to 18 years, participated in 45-60 minute individual interviews. The girls identified themselves as Asian (46%), Caucasian (48%), and First Nations (6%). The semi-structured interviews were guided by stress, coping, and self-presentation theoretical perspectives (Lazarus, 1999; Leary, 1992). The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Themes emerged from the data using content analysis. Prevalence counts were used to examine ethnic differences.

Overall, 71% of the participants reported experiencing some degree of SPA ranging on a continuum of frequency and severity. Caucasian girls (77%) were more inclined to have feelings of body-related anxiety compared to Asian (62%) and First Nation (66%) girls. While no cultural differences were evident in describing some of the attributes associated with the "ideal body", a number of Caucasian girls provided more detailed information about precise parts of the body. Also, certain attributes of the "ideal body" varied according to different societal beliefs as a small number of Asian girls mentioned struggling to find their identities. Independent of ethnicity, the girls reported being affected by similar sources of SPA, including popular culture, relationships, and school. They also reported similar strategies to deal with SPA (i.e., dieting, exercising, changing appearance). Despite these similarities, an interesting finding that emerged from the interviews was the degree of dependence on one's cultural background as a frame of reference for describing the ideal body, situations that perpetuate body anxiety, and coping strategies. Furthermore, comparisons between cultures served to ease some teenagers but perpetuate body anxiety for others. Cultural and ethnic comparisons seemed to influence several girls' sense of physical self and identity as a "Canadian" adolescent. These findings highlight the need to examine degree of acculturation, rather than to simply identify culture or ethnicity. Implications for future research and theoretical advancements will be presented.

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