

Abstract presented at the Canadian Society for Psychomotor Learning and Sport Psychology (SCAPPS): Vancouver BC, October 2002.

FEMALE ADOLESCENTS' COPING WITH BODY-RELATED ANXIETY

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Concerns with body appearance and physique are related to many health behaviours, such as eating pathologies and exercise conduct, which could be clarified by understanding the coping process. The notion of social physique anxiety, rooted in social anxiety and self-presentation theoretical frameworks, has been quantified by numerous researchers (Crawford & Eklund, 1994; Crocker et al., 2000; Hart et al., 1989; Kowalski et al., 2000; Krane et al., 2001;). However, limited research has investigated social physique anxiety concerns from a coping perspective. It has been proposed that individuals engage in avoidance or approach strategies that could compromise their psychological and physiological health (Hart et al., 1989; Lazarus 1993). Studying social physique anxiety within the coping discourse could enhance the current understanding of how individuals deal with situations deemed threatening. Specific concerns should be directed at adolescent females, since adolescence is a developmental period whereby changes in body shape and appearance become unavoidable threats to their self-worth (Fox, 1997). Therefore, the purpose of this research was to gain an in-depth understanding of female adolescents' experiences of social physique anxiety and the ways they attempt to deal with the influences and consequences of this anxiety.

Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with 13-18 year old female adolescent volunteers ($M = 16.66$, $SD=1.88$) who were asked to take part in a study investigating body anxiety during adolescence. The results of the interviews were grouped into categories driven by research and theoretical frameworks in social anxiety and coping domains (Hart et al., 1989; Kowalski & Leary, 1995; Lazarus, 1993; Leary, 1992). Adolescent females reported experiencing anxiety about their bodies as a result of comparisons to others, such as celebrities, as well as due to the expectations of others (primarily mothers and male peers). Situations that were antecedent to enhanced physique anxiety included settings in which the body was perceived to be on display or where direct comparisons to others were possible (i.e., swimming, physical education classes, parties, reading magazines). Adolescent females identified their primary coping strategies as including dietary and physical activity manipulations, the ingestion of tobacco and narcotics, and altering their clothing and appearance. The ease of the coping mechanisms was the motivating factor in their use. The results of the focus groups are consistent with various quantitative research findings; however, they provide a more extensive view of the prevalence and consequences of physique anxiety in adolescent females. Implications related to this research are directed towards the health-compromising behaviours used to deal with physique anxiety, and concern possible mediations of the main influences pertaining to the apprehension with physical appearance.

*This research is funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada