

**Exploring Body Dissatisfaction Among Black, Latina, and White Pre-Adolescent U.S.
Girls: A Community-Based Participatory Research Study**

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Abstract

Body image is a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive assessments of self-worth based on physical appearance and behaviors intended to mitigate body dissatisfaction. Although body image develops in childhood and girls of color have unique and varied body image concerns, most research has examined body-size dissatisfaction among predominately White adolescent and adult women. We used a community-based participatory research approach and 6 focus group discussions with 28 Black, Latina, and White girls aged 8-11 years to explore various aspects of body dissatisfaction and its sociocultural determinants among pre-adolescent girls from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. Using thematic analysis, we identified 4 themes from the focus groups: 1) race/ethnicity-specific body image concerns, 2) social comparison based on dominant female beauty standards, 3) body shaming and bullying by peers and family members, and 4) coping and resistance strategies. We found that body dissatisfaction was common among pre-adolescent girls, and specific body image concerns differed across racial/ethnic groups. Further, pre-adolescent girls' (dis)satisfaction with their bodies was the product of social comparisons rooted in both sexism and racism and was positively and negatively shaped by media, family, and peer influences. Girls used various strategies to challenge negative influences and need additional support to develop positive body image.

Keywords: Body image; gender; girls; pre-adolescence; race/ethnicity

Introduction

Body image is a multidimensional construct that includes body dissatisfaction – namely, negative cognitive assessments of self-worth based on one’s physical appearance. Although experienced by individuals of all genders, women and girls consistently report higher levels of body dissatisfaction compared to men and boys (Karazsia et al., 2017; Littleton & Ollendick, 2003). Additionally, research shows that body dissatisfaction is associated with a range of negative health outcomes across the lifespan, including poor self-esteem, depression, and disordered eating behaviors (Van den Berg et al., 2010; Stice & Shaw, 2002; Stice et al., 2000).

The scientific literature on body dissatisfaction has several gaps that the present study sought to address. First, a recent meta-analysis of studies conducted among children found that between 20% and 70% of youth feel unhappy with their bodies as early as preschool (Tatangelo et al., 2016). Despite increasing evidence that body dissatisfaction emerges in childhood, the majority of studies have been conducted among adolescent and adult women (Grogan, 2016; Paxton & Damiano, 2017). Second, although differences have been noted in body dissatisfaction across racial/ethnic groups (Grabe & Hyde, 2006), most research conducted among both adults and children has used samples of predominantly White individuals (Capodilupo & Kim, 2014; Tatangelo et al., 2016). Furthermore, studies examining differences by race/ethnicity have tended to focus on dissatisfaction with body size, without considering other salient physical features that underlie beauty standards and may also play a role in the development of body dissatisfaction among girls of color (Spurgas, 2005). Third, although researchers have identified parents, peers, and the media as particularly important in the development of body dissatisfaction, few studies have examined how racially/ethnically diverse children perceive and experience the impact of these influences on their attitudes towards their bodies (Tatangelo et al., 2016).

In order to address these knowledge gaps, we conducted a qualitative research study to explore body dissatisfaction and its socio-cultural determinants in a sample of Black, Latina, and White pre-adolescent girls. Specifically, we used a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach to document the body image concerns and experiences of young, racially/ethnically diverse girls from their perspective and in their own words and with the input of key stakeholders who could effect change. Our research findings informed the development of a body satisfaction promotion program for girls from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. The present study will inform the conduct of additional research and interventions that promote positive body image among all pre-adolescent girls, including girls of color, and help mitigate the cumulative toll of body dissatisfaction on the health of diverse groups of women throughout the life course.

Methods

Study Design

This study was conducted in partnership with a community-based organization that provides after-school group mentoring to racially/ethnically diverse pre-adolescent girls and guided by a CBPR approach, which equitably involves both community members and academic researchers in all phases of the research process (Israel et al., 2013; Agénor et al., 2018). This approach helped ensure that our research goals were aligned with community priorities and that our study design, instruments, and results were informed by input from various community stakeholders (Israel et al., 2013; Agénor et al., 2018). In line with a CBPR approach, all study activities were guided by a Steering Committee using a participatory group decision-making process (Israel et al., 2013; Hoyt et al., 2003; Agénor et al., 2018). Our Steering Committee was composed of three academic researchers as well as three staff members and two college mentors

working with the community partner (Agénor et al., 2018). We used a qualitative research design to generate detailed accounts of body image concerns among Black, Latina, and White girls aged 8-11 years from their perspective and in their own words (Ulin et al., 2005). More specifically, we conducted focus group discussions (N=6) to efficiently capture a broad range of perspectives and generate rich data by facilitating conversation between girls (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Focus groups were age-stratified (n=3 with girls aged 8-9 years and n=3 with girls aged 10-11 years) to align with girls' existing mentoring groups, which helped ensure that girls were comfortable partaking in the discussion. Focus group findings were used to develop a research-informed, body satisfaction promotion program for racially/ethnically diverse pre-adolescent girls.

Study Participants

Four program sites (e.g., schools, community centers) in low-income neighborhoods in the greater Boston area were purposively sampled as study recruitment sites based on their racial/ethnic and age composition to ensure the inclusion of Black, Latina, and White girls aged 8-11 years. All girls participating in after-school group mentoring at one of these program sites were eligible to enroll in the study. Staff and college mentors at each of the four sites recruited participants by distributing flyers and making announcements about the study during on-going mentoring groups. Through this process, a total of 28 Black, Latina, and White girls aged 8-11 years living the greater Boston area were recruited to participate in one of six focus groups in May and June 2016. All research activities were approved by the Office of Human Research Administration at Harvard Longwood Medical Area.

Data Collection Procedures

The majority of focus groups (five out of six) were facilitated by at least one of girls' two trained college mentors in a private room at their regular mentoring site to ensure a comfortable

and rich discussion. To moderate discussions among participants, facilitators used a semi-structured focus group guide developed collaboratively by Steering Committee members and based on the prior body image literature (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The guide, which was pilot tested with two pre-adolescent girls, consisted of open-ended discussion questions pertaining to the following topics: female and male role models; body image beliefs, attitudes, and experiences; media, parental, and peer influences; and coping and resistance strategies. Examples of focus group discussion questions include: “Who are some women and girls you look up to?” and “How do these women and girls make you feel about your own body?” Focus group discussions lasted for 60-90 minutes and were conducted in English. All discussions were both audio-recorded and documented by a notetaker. A brief demographic survey was distributed at the end of each focus group discussion to assess participants’ demographic characteristics, which were linked to participants’ focus group responses based on the notes taken by the focus group notetaker (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Data Analysis

Focus group audio recordings were transcribed by Steering Committee members and entered into ATLAS.ti version 7 (ATLAS.ti GmbH, Berlin, Germany) for data analysis. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in four phases: (1) immersion in the data, (2) codebook development, testing, and refinement, (3) inductive and deductive coding of transcripts by two independent coders, and (4) identification of themes and sub-themes. Themes and sub-themes were refined based on feedback from the Steering Committee, college mentors, and other community stakeholders (e.g., school social worker). Study findings were used to inform the development of a research-informed program geared towards promoting body satisfaction among racially-ethnically diverse pre-adolescent girls.

Results

Sociodemographic Characteristics

Of the 28 participants, 16 (57%) were aged 8-9 years and 12 (43%) were aged 10-11 years. Moreover, 12 (43%) participants self-identified as Black, 10 (36%) as Latina, 5 (18%) as White, and 1 (4%) as biracial. All resided in low-income neighborhoods in the greater Boston area.

Race/Ethnicity-Specific Negative Self-Perceptions

Body dissatisfaction was common among Black, Latina, and White pre-adolescent girls alike, with specific concerns differing across racial/ethnic groups. Specifically, most girls reported experiencing some level of dissatisfaction with their body size. For example, a 10-year-old White girl discussed how she preferred wearing bigger clothes than necessary to “hide how big [her] stomach is.” Multiple White and Latina participants as well as one Black participant also mentioned feeling bad when family members or other children called them “fat,” suggesting a preference for a thin body type. This sentiment was echoed by participants in a group of five 8-year-old Latina girls who noted that they wanted to be “tall” and “skinny” when they grew up.

Additionally, Black and Latina girls’ body image concerns often also included physical characteristics other than body size – namely, eye color, skin color, and hair length, texture, and color. For example, in a focus group of Black 10-11-year-olds, participants described having “long,” “flowy,” or “wavy” hair with “blonde highlights” and “light blue eyes” as highly desirable. Similarly, with regard to hair and eye color, an 8-year-old Latina girl in another group noted:

When I was new out here, [...] I went to school, and I was pretty jealous because all the people had like blonde hair and all of that. Their eyes were like green or something. So I told my mom I don’t want to go to school because kids were different from me, ‘cause I had short hair, and they had long hair. They had blonde hair, and I had brown hair. I was

the only person in my class that had a different color from the other ones, so I was a little bit like I want that color, I want this color.

In terms of skin tone, another 8-year-old Latina girl stated: “Mostly everyone in my class is a lighter color than me, so I feel different because I’m darker.”

Social Comparisons Based on Dominant Standards of Female Beauty

Several Black, Latina, and White girls described how comparing their bodies to those of female celebrities (e.g., singers, actresses, and models), female peers, and both female and male family members contributed to body dissatisfaction and negative emotions (e.g., jealousy, anger, sadness). An 8-year-old White girl explained that she compares herself to models and the unattainable standards of beauty they embody, which leaves her feeling like she is not “so beautiful because, in the magazines, they always make the models so beautiful.” Echoing a similar sentiment, an 8-year-old Black girl discussed how she compares herself to singer and actress, Selena Gomez: “Her body is...way skinnier than mine, and her face is way prettier than mine.” Regarding female peers, a 9-year-old White girl noted:

We always want to be better than other people when comparing ourselves to other people. And, when we do that, we always look at details. The more we look at details, the more we feel awful about ourselves.

Similarly, speaking about her friend, an 11-year-old Black and Latina girl explained: “I used to get jealous of her because her eyes change color, light brown, blue, and green, and I really loved the blue because that always used to be my favorite color.” In terms of female family members, a 10-year-old White girl noted: “I get jealous of my sister because she’s wicked skinny, and I’m not. And I get mad because I can’t fit into some dress that I really like.” Additionally, a few girls also described comparing their bodies to those of male family members, particularly in relation to physical strength, which they described as a desirable physical trait. An 8-year-old Black girl noted: “I compare myself to two people, my dad because, well, he’s taller than me, and my uncle

because [...] he's way stronger than me. His muscles are bigger than my head, and so I always think that I'm weak and that I'm not as strong as that."

Social comparisons to celebrities, peers, and relatives were based on dominant standards of female beauty propagated by mass media. With regard to media, an 8-year-old White girl stated: "[...] men don't really like people with different hair than long because they think of it as weird and stuff because sometimes on TV shows...everything relates to TV shows." Moreover, girls described how media portrayed physical strength and toughness (which they perceived to be positive physical traits) as desirable for male but not female bodies. An 8-year-old White girl elaborated: "[...] Most of the time, a tough guy on TV or something [...] will be a boy, and they always exclude girls from it." In contrast, girls observed that female bodies were often portrayed as "thin" and "skinny" in TV shows and magazines.

Further, several participants described receiving messages about how they should look and behave from family members, especially their mothers. For example, a 10-year-old Black girl stated: "my mom, she like literally likes to dress me up so girly-girl, she will get mad at me if I don't put lip gloss on, and I'm like 'what?!'" Further, an 8-year-old Latina girl described how her mother ensured that she wore clothing that conformed to the gender norms set by her culture and country of origin. She noted: "In Guatemala, girls are used to wearing dresses and skirts, and I don't really use a lot of dresses, so sometimes my mother tries to persuade me to use some dresses." Moreover, describing how her mother regulates her "gender-appropriate" behavior, an 8-year-old Latina girl noted: "My family is quiet when they're like watching the movies and the television. They're quiet but I like to do boys things, do like jump all over. [...] My mom always says, don't jump a lot, don't do cartwheels, don't do anything that jumps or anything."

Body Shaming and Body-Based Bullying by Peers and Family Members

Many Black, Latina, and White girls alike reported being shamed and bullied about their bodies by both female and male peers, which contributed to both body dissatisfaction and negative emotions (e.g., anger, sadness). With regard to female peers, an 8-year-old Black girl noted: “There’s this girl in my [...] church, and she’s been mean to me sometimes, and she keeps calling me that I’m like the fat one. She always tells me that I’m not good enough.” Speaking about her female classmates, she later added: “People always judge me by my shirt size. They always think I’m fat because I’m a size 10/12 and they’re a size 6/8 and stuff.” Similarly, speaking about a girl at her summer camp, an 8-year-old White girl explained:

I’d walk in with her, and she would basically tell me ‘I don’t want to play with you anymore, you’re getting way too fat, you have problems, you need to go tell the doctor,’ and she would take me into the bathroom so the counselors and teachers wouldn’t hear and try to stop us.

Moreover, in relation to male peers, an 8-year-old White girl described how one of her male classmates excluded girls from playing soccer at recess because they were either not “tall enough,” “strong enough,” “tough enough,” or “pretty” enough. Similarly, when asked about who perpetrated the body-based bullying she experienced at school, a 10-year-old Black girl explained: “Well, mostly, not really girls that say things, but boys who say things...they said that ‘you’re so ugly, and you look very fat, and this is why you don’t have much friends.’”

Many Black, Latina, and White girls also reported experiencing body shaming and body-based bullying from female and male relatives. In particular, several participants mentioned that their mothers often made negative comments about their bodies, including saying that they had “a big butt” (8-year-old Black girl) or were “too fat” (8-year-old White girl). Additionally, when talking about her mother, one 10-year-old white girl stated: “my mom...put me on a diet once and that made me so mad.” Several participants also described being called “ugly” and “fat” by

their brothers and fathers. For example, an 8-year-old Black girl described being shamed and bullied by her older brother as follows:

My brother always tells me that I have to look like all these famous girls, and that I have to look like other people. [...] Like girls on the movies. [...] He always tells me I have to look like, you know, the Victoria's Secret girls. Yeah, the models, I should look like them. So he always forces me to go outside and, like, get some weights. He goes on my back, and I have to walk.

Coping and Resistance Strategies

Our results show that Black, Latina, and White girls alike managed negative emotions and challenged body dissatisfaction by using both interpersonal and intrapersonal coping and resistance strategies. With respect to interpersonal strategies, many girls described seeking and receiving social support, including emotional comfort and messages of affirmation and empowerment from their mothers and female friends. For example, an 8-year-old White girl who regularly experienced body-based bullying from her peers, stated:

Every day, before I go to school, I ask my mom if I can put on makeup because I don't feel like I'm as good looking as other girls. And she always tells me that I'm beautiful just the way I am, and that I don't need makeup.

Similarly, another 8-year-old White girl described her mother as a source of support because "every morning, she usually tells me I have strong muscles." In contrast, a 10-year-old Latina girl discussed how she turns to her female friends who understand what she is experiencing for support instead of her mother: "If you're talking to your friend and they feel that they have the same thing, they'll tell you 'it's okay,' and you'll feel not so upset." A 10-year-old White girl also discussed how she preferred spending time with friends who had a similar body size as her because they "actually know how the other one feels."

In terms of intrapersonal strategies to cope with and challenge body dissatisfaction, many girls also described positive body image attitudes, namely that they not only valued physical beauty but also “internal beauty” (e.g., personality traits). For example, when asked what made Beyoncé, a female singer and actress, her favorite celebrity, an 11-year old biracial girl stated, “I think her personality. Like, she’s not only pretty on the outside, but also on the inside.” Moreover, when asked what made the models she saw in magazines beautiful, an 8-year-old White girl noted: “It’s probably gotta be what’s in the inside and not the outside. So I’d say their heart is more beautiful.”

Additionally, many Black, Latina, and White girls also described coping with and challenging body dissatisfaction stemming from body shaming and body-based bullying by turning to messages of self-acceptance and empowerment, which they described as coming mostly from family members (particularly mothers), and female peers. For example, referring to being shamed and bullied by her brother about not looking like a Victoria’s Secret model, an 8-year-old Black girl stated: “Sometimes it makes me feel like I have to be them, and sometimes it feels like I just, like I don’t have to be them, I have to be myself.” Similarly, with regard to being bullied about her body by male classmates, an 8-year-old Latina girl noted: “I don’t care what other people think of me, I care what I think of myself. If they’re like, ‘I don’t like you,’ it doesn’t matter if he likes me or not, I’m just who I am, I’m myself. Nobody can change anything of me.” Responding to a question about how body-based bullying made her feel, another 8-year-old Latina girl, stated: “[...] I’m actually happy with how my body is, and I don’t want to change none of it.” Similarly, an 8-year-old Black girl countered a White participant’s statement about commercial models needing to be “skinny” and “pretty” by stating: “No, that’s not true. Because to be on a commercial, you don’t have to be pretty, you have to be yourself.”

Many girls also experienced tensions between the negative messages they received about their bodies and positive messages of self-acceptance they received from family members and female peers – often even contradicting their own prior statements. For example, when asked again how comparing themselves to their friends with “light blue eyes” made them feel about themselves, participants did not express body dissatisfaction or jealousy as they had done previously but rather stated: “It doesn’t matter. ‘Cause I’m happy the way I am” (10-year-old Black girl), followed by “We’re happy the way we are” (11-year-old Black girl). Similarly, an 8-year-old White girl followed a statement about not feeling pretty enough when she compared herself to models with: “Just be yourself. You should always just be yourself, no matter what anyone else says.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore body dissatisfaction and its socio-cultural determinants among Black, Latina, and White pre-adolescent girls. Our results indicate that body dissatisfaction was common, with specific body image concerns varying across racial/ethnic groups. Specifically, while all girls expressed dissatisfaction related to their body size, Black and Latina girls’ concerns also frequently related to skin color, hair length, texture, and color, and eye color. Across all racial/ethnic groups, participants indicated that body dissatisfaction stemmed from social comparisons to female celebrities, female peers, and female and male relatives based on both gendered and racialized standards of beauty prevalent in society. Further, body image was negatively shaped by body shaming and body-based bullying by female and male peers and family members, including mothers. With respect to coping and resistance strategies, girls expressed receiving social support from mothers and female peers and engaging in self-affirmations (e.g., valuing “internal beauty” and practicing self-acceptance).

This study advanced prior research by documenting racial/ethnic differences in specific body image concerns that contribute to dissatisfaction among racially/ethnically diverse girls, including girls of color. Prior studies only focused on body image concerns in relation to body size, and generally found that Black girls were more satisfied and had less weight concerns than White girls, while indicating that Latina and Asian girls may have higher or similar levels of body dissatisfaction as their White peers (Mikolajczyk et al., 2012; Bucchianeri et al., 2016; Robbins et al., 2017). Our findings suggest that focusing solely on body size may fail to capture the full spectrum of body dissatisfaction among girls of color, who also cited negative self-perceptions related to physical features beyond size. In particular, participants expressed body dissatisfaction related to physical attributes indicative of racial/ethnic discrimination (e.g., skin tone and hair texture). This finding is consistent with prior research conducted among racially/ethnically diverse adult women, which found that salient drivers of body dissatisfaction for women of color extended beyond an idealized thin body type to also include negative attitudes towards racialized physical features (Buchanan et al., 2008; Capodilupo, 2015).

Similar to research conducted using predominantly White samples, our findings indicated that body dissatisfaction among racially/ethnically diverse pre-adolescent girls was influenced by social comparisons (Myers & Crowther, 2009). We found that social comparisons primarily led to dissatisfaction with body size among White girls, per gendered beauty standards. Among girls of color, social comparisons also led to negative feelings about not conforming to racialized beauty standards that valorized straight or wavy hair as well as light skin, hair, and eyes. Thus, our findings suggest that Black and Latina girls engaged in social comparisons steeped in both the social devaluation of women (sexism) and people of color (racism). Given the limited research on pre-adolescent body image concerns beyond body-size dissatisfaction, more work is

needed to explicitly examine how gendered racism shapes body dissatisfaction across multiple domains of physical appearance among girls of color.

In relation to media influences, our results were consistent with prior research showing that television, magazines, and music videos were important sources of information about beauty standards among girls (Clark & Tiggemann, 2006; López-Guimerà et al., 2010). In our study, Black, Latina, and White pre-adolescent girls identified female celebrities – namely, singers, actresses, and models – as a major point of reference regarding female beauty. While it is well established that the media perpetuates gendered standards of beauty that place a premium on women’s and girls’ physical appearance (Cash & Labarge, 1996), our findings suggest that exposure to female celebrities in particular may play a pivotal role in establishing gendered beauty standards as early as the age of 8 years old.

Participants also commonly identified family members and peers as important sources of both stress and support related to body dissatisfaction. Consistent with research conducted among predominantly White samples, girls’ accounts depicted mothers (Rodgers & Chabrol, 2009), as well as male family members and both female and male peers, as contributing to body dissatisfaction through body shaming and body-based bullying (Menzel et al., 2010; Saunders & Frazier, 2016). In contrast, participants also identified their mothers and female peers as primary sources of emotional support in helping them manage body dissatisfaction. While this finding is in line with prior research on protective factors (Maor & Cwikel, 2016), it also highlights a greater need to disentangle how potentially contradictory body image-related messages from both family members and peers are processed by girls as they develop their own sense of self-worth and identity.

In addition to relying on interpersonal sources of social support, girls also frequently reported valuing “internal beauty” and practicing self-acceptance as ways to challenge negative body image perceptions. These findings were in line with research on the role of positive body image (i.e., body appreciation and acceptance stemming from an understanding of beauty that extends beyond physical appearance) in preventing body dissatisfaction (Levine & Smolak, 2016; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Our research suggests that culturally-tailored programs that enhance positive body image starting in childhood may help equip racially/ethnically diverse girls, including girls of color, with life-long coping resources to reduce the psychological burden of gendered and racialized body dissatisfaction. Thus, we used our study findings to develop and implement a research-informed, body satisfaction promotion program for racially/ethnically diverse pre-adolescent girls. This three-month-long program actively engaged girls in collaboratively creating and disseminating zines that celebrated their diverse bodies as well as their full selves (e.g., intelligence, creativity, personality).

This study’s research findings should be interpreted in light of some limitations. First, although our qualitative research design allowed for a rich, nuanced exploration of body image concerns among racially/ethnically diverse pre-adolescent girls, data were only collected through focus group discussions. Collecting data through multiple sources would have allowed for the triangulation of findings, which could have strengthened the validity of our results (Creswell & Clark, 2011). As a next step, we intend to conduct in-depth interviews to further explore the specific and unique body image concerns of girls of color in the context of gendered and racialized beauty standards. Second, given that the majority of focus group moderators were individuals with whom girls had prior relationships (in order to foster rapport), it is possible that girls provided socially desirable accounts aligned with mentors’ expectations and the goals of the

mentoring program. Lastly, most (70%) focus group moderators self-identified as White women. Thus, it is possible that girls, who were predominately Black and Latina, would have provided different accounts of their body image beliefs, attitudes, and experiences to women of color.

Prior studies have found that school-based programs that fostered media literacy, discussed the role peers played in young people's lives, and addressed parents' attitudes towards their children's bodies may effectively reduce the risk of body dissatisfaction in early adolescence (Yager et al., 2013; Hart et al., 2016). However, few of these programs have specifically focused on the unique needs of girls of color in the context of both sexism and racism. Our findings suggest that researchers should build on these promising interventions to develop, test, and implement programs that support racially/ethnically diverse pre-adolescent girls, including girls of color who are particularly underserved, in navigating and challenging not only gendered but also racialized beauty standards and body image-related messages in the media and among peers and parents. However, given the frequency with which Black, Latina, and White pre-adolescent girls alike described experiencing body dissatisfaction, strategies that directly target the sexism and racism, as well as other forms of stigma and discrimination, that underlie standards of beauty and the representation of diverse women's and girls' bodies in the media and society are also needed to foster positive body image among all girls and women.

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