



The Learning Curve

Annual Academic Journal

Psychology Department, Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi

A Qualitative Investigation of Weight Dissatisfaction among Indian Female Adolescents and Young Women

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Although definitions of female beauty have changed over time, the emphasis placed on women's physical attractiveness has endured. Beauty does not always lie in the eyes of the individual beholder. Rather people within a given culture, often share conceptions of what they consider to be beautiful in women. The socio-cultural perspective on physical attractiveness states that culture defines what constitutes beautiful and self-perceptions of attractiveness depend on these definitions. Travis & Meginnis-Payne (2001) have discussed the paradoxes inherent in the beauty messages given to women. For example while one beauty myth is that "one must labor to be beautiful", the counter myth is that "beauty knows no pain." Such messages are confusing and restrictive as they provide space for only one kind of beauty that each woman has to attain to be considered attractive. Moreover although the definitions of physical attractiveness are arbitrary and unrealistic, they are presented as if they are a universal truth.

An aspect of appearance considered significant for attractiveness in present times is a slender body. Though weight dissatisfaction has been understood as a Western phenomenon, recent research has shown it to be common even in those cultures where conventional notions of beauty have differed from the West and have not been about being slim. For example Mousa et al (2010) found body dissatisfaction and negative eating attitudes among adolescent schoolgirls in

Jordan while Jung et al, (2006) found that Korean women exhibited greater body dissatisfaction and more disordered eating than American women.

In discussing the weight concerns of Indian women, it is important to note that the earlier Indian beauty ideal presumed a figure with rounded curves. Even today, food continues to be the main symbol of hospitality. Despite this, many urban Indian girls and women are accepting the notion of *thinness as ideal* (Thapan, 2009). Phrases such as 'size zero' and 'six pack' have become a part of everyday discourse. The number of gymnasiums has escalated and diet foods have become easily available. Some research has revealed young women in India to show levels of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating that are similar to those found in the West (Rubin et al, 2008; Kayano et al, 2008).

The reasons for growing concerns with weight in urban India may lie in an intricate interaction of several factors. Munshi (2001) notes that there has been a shift in the way Indian women are presented towards an emphasis on glamour, sexuality and appearance. This trend becomes extremely clear by looking at the media content available to the urban Indian consumer. In addition, young city-dwelling women may be vulnerable to weight dissatisfaction due to the increased social acceptance of dating and certain professions such as stewarding and modeling which place great emphasis on physical appearance. While

mainly patriarchal, urban India is transforming into a society where more and more women are stepping out of their homes and competing with men for coveted positions. The feminist perspective predicts that as these changes take place in women's roles, parallel attempts at maintaining the hegemony of patriarchy can be expected that include telling women how they must look and behave in these newly available roles.

The studies done on body image and weight dissatisfaction in India are relatively recent and have mainly been quantitative in nature. We decided to conduct a qualitative investigation examining the individual and personal experiences of weight dissatisfaction in Indian adolescent girls and young women. More specifically the objectives of our research were to identify the factors recognized by young women as contributing to weight dissatisfaction, its perceived physical, psychological and interpersonal implications and the desired supports and services. The participants ($n = 10$) were selected from a larger sample of adolescent girls and young women (ages 15- 21 years) contacted through visits to various schools and colleges in New Delhi. Every participant from the larger sample completed the Body-Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (Mendelson, White, & Mendelson 1997), an instrument that assesses persons' feelings about their appearance. After the questionnaires had been scored, 11 participants who reported a high sense of weight dissatisfaction were contacted for interviews. 10 young women- 3 high school students, 6 undergraduate students and 1 post graduate student -gave their consent and were interviewed. All the participants belonged to upper middle class families and were living with their parents. None reported any history of eating disorders. The interviews were semi-structured, ranging in length from 60 to 90 minutes. Each was audio-taped and transcribed. The data was analyzed through the interpretive phenomenological approach (Smith & Eatough, 2007). In what follows, we present the results that emerged.

One of the important themes we found in the data was "*role of the family*". The family emerged as playing three distinct roles in the participants' lives with respect to weight dissatisfaction-criticizing the participants for their weight, supporting them in attempting to lose weight and being concerned about their own weights. Several participants said that their family members, in particular parents, criticized their weights. The need to lose weight was communicated by close relatives in diverse ways. For example, Sonam said that her father would tell her younger sister to exercise, or else she would "*end up like her elder sister*" while Carol said that her father would compare her body to those of thinner women. Despite acknowledging that comments were hurtful, many participants believed that parents had their children's best interests in mind. Sonam said, "*When my parents say these things, it's for my good. I want to look good. My parents also want me to look good. So why shouldn't they say it then? It's just that they should not tell me again and again.*" Whereas some family members were considered disapproving, others were perceived to be supportive. Four participants reported that their mothers assisted them in their weight reducing efforts by accompanying them to the gym, motivating them to exercise, taking them to dieticians and providing them a low-fat diet.

Many participants said that their parents were concerned about their own weight and exercised regularly. The social learning theory suggests that parents influence their children's body image through modeling, feedback and instruction (Kearney-Cooke 2002). The present findings support this view. The results also showed that members within the same family were perceived as playing contrasting roles ranging from supportive to critical. However, it appears that even when family members were being supportive, the message being given to the participants was that losing weight was important. Within the Indian setting, the significant role played by the family in monitoring young women's weights may be partly linked to the larger social practice of parents arranging marriages for children.

Matrimonial advertisements often used for findings matches state a preference for brides who are slim. However it is likely that the tradition of arranged marriages only partly explains parents' involvement in their daughters' weight management. Some parents may be motivated by a different set of reasons. For example, parents may feel that people who meet cultural ideals of beauty are better accepted, in society. They may also feel concerned about their daughters' health and stamina. The rhetoric against obesity is on the rise on Indian television and in the print media. This is likely to shape older and younger persons' attitudes towards weight.

Another theme in the data was the **influence of peers**. All the participants regarded their friends to be sensitive to their weight concerns. Many said that close friends helped them by telling the participants that they looked good, avoiding discussions on weight, and talking optimistically about losing weight. Like Vibha said *"(Friends) know if they discuss (weight issues), I will feel bad... They are quite supportive...If they want to talk about it, they tell me 'You will (lose weight).'*" Although friends were supportive, some participants said that they felt the need to be thinner because their friends also wanted to be thinner. The participants also said that they felt pressurized to lose weight when they and their friends compared their bodies to each other or to those of thinner female peers. Once again, there appeared to be a dichotomy in the role played by friends. Although the outward message was one of support, the implicit message was of thinness being appreciated. Apart from friends, certain peers were perceived to be inconsiderate as they ignored the participants and excluded them from their groups. In addition some participants said that they had been teased about their weights in school,. Rodin & Striegel-Moore (1984) coined the term 'normative discontent' to describe the prevalence of weight dissatisfaction amongst Western women. Although we can make no such generalizations, it appears that the adolescents and young women saw themselves as belonging to a peer environment where thinness was highly valued and that they found it

difficult to escape these messages. This may have pushed the participants to want to lose weight, though their friends tried to ease their distress.

We also asked participants about the role of **media** in the development of weight dissatisfaction. Many participants said they paid close attention to the bodies of models in magazines and actresses on television and in movies. For instance Nysa said she compared herself to an actress from a popular American show. She said *"Have you seen Gossip Girl? There is this one girl on it, Blake Lively, so I Googled her weight coz you're always looking for comparison...and I know it sounds really stupid but I had no one else to compare myself with. So I go online & she's like 55kgs & I was like that's not too bad coz I am 3-4 kgs off the mark & she's a celebrity & I am normal. So I'm fine."* Interestingly, all the participants disapproved of the 'size zero' concept. Again Nysa said *"When (media) put a stupid bracket of size zero, you are expecting people to meet a standard which they biologically cannot meet. I think what the media does is perverse."* The criticism of 'size zero' and of the media hype around weight makes it appear as if some adolescents and young women were making choices about the weight-related goals they wanted to pursue and those they found unrealistic. However criticizing the media does not necessarily mean that women were insusceptible to its effects. For example although Nysa found what the media was doing highly disturbing, she also found it important to judge her body as *"not too bad"* after comparing it to an actress. The effect of media exposure on women's body image is well proven. Yet Keller (2011) found that teen magazine editors dismissed the view that the images in their magazines could negatively affect the girls reading them. The editors believed that making beauty "fun" would negate the possibly harmful effects of beauty pages. The participants' narratives clearly indicate that this is not the case, creating a need for editors to re-assess the impact their magazines have on women.

The participants believed that there was much they could **gain from losing weight**. They saw their weights as interfering with several things that they wanted in life. These included being able to eat certain kinds of food and getting attention from the opposite sex. Several adolescents and young women spoke about not being able to fit into the clothes of their choice and found shopping for clothes to be tedious. They believed that either the clothes were not available in their sizes and or did not look good on them. While there was a sense of missing out on things, there was also the belief that much would be gained by reducing weight in terms of social acceptance, feeling confident, looking prettier, and having more opportunities. For example, Sonam said that if she lost weight she could be able to fulfill her desire of becoming a compere. Shobha expressed that looking good was an important requirement for the corporate life that she wanted to enter. Chin Evans (2003) has suggested that thinness may not be the only reason for which women want to lose weight. Rather it is also the belief that thin women have perfect lives. In line with the feminist perspective, we feel that it is important to help Indian women deconstruct the idea that fitting into a prescribed definition of beauty results in a better life. It is common for women who do not feel attractive, to judge themselves as unworthy. However women who know that they are attractive may have it no better, with their self-image being dependent their physical appearance and the responses it draws from others.

The participants **battled their weight** in both physical and psychological ways. The physical struggle was about losing the pounds through changing eating patterns and or exercising. Six participants said they were currently exercising and watching what they ate. However none of them believed that they were 'dieting'. For example Nysa stressed that her eating and exercising were not 'abnormal'. She said *"I never deny myself anything like if I want to eat a muffin I'll have a bite. I'll make sure that I won't eat the whole thing coz I will like die of guilt. I eat properly, I eat 5 meals a day. But no sugar, no white carbs. My exercise.....I am not mental. I know what my limits are. I don't*

push myself beyond a point." None of the participants reported attempting any health-endangering means of weight loss such as diet pills or extreme measures like liposuction. Neither did they report disturbed eating pathology. Though previous research has indicated a relationship between body dissatisfaction and eating disordered behavior, the participants here said that they would not use such means of weight loss. These results can be explained in two very different ways. One explanation could be that, the involvement of families in the participants' lives, in the form of monitoring their food intake, exercising with them and providing support protected them from eating disorders. However another possibility could be that some participants did not report their disturbed eating patterns. We had no way of verifying how much they actually ate. The participants' psychological struggles were about protecting themselves from feelings of hurt and distress. Several respondents reported a sense of frustration, fear of gaining weight and guilt over breaking diet and exercise rules. The adolescents and young women adopted various strategies to deal with their feelings. Several spoke of how they had stopped caring about others' opinions of their bodies. Some adolescents and young women protected themselves moving away when others discussed weight or by staying away from situations in which they felt vulnerable to scrutiny. Aruna & Taruna said that they hid their bodies by wearing loose fitting clothes. Vibha said that whatever confidence she lost out on because of her body, she gained by playing great tennis. The participants tried to stay optimistic about their weight loss attempts and constantly motivated themselves.

When asked about the kinds of **supports** they desired all the participants stated that they wanted more family and peer support to deal with their sense of weight dissatisfaction. When asked if they had ever thought of consulting a counselor, most participants felt that they did not require such interventions. The perception was that counseling was required for 'severe' problems and their own weight concerns were not serious enough to warrant it. Although body

dissatisfaction and eating disorders are known to occur on a continuum, the participants believed there to be only two possibilities- either that of having a full blown eating disorder or that of being 'normal'. Taruna said "*(The need for counseling) depends on how extreme the situation is. There was one girl in school. She was made fun of. Then she just turned anorexic. May be cases like her need counseling.*" The participants' responses were not surprising, considering that counseling is still a developing field in India and there are several myths that surround the role of mental health professionals. Also, family ties continue to remain strong reducing the need to seek help outside. Although the participants denied needing the assistance of psychologists, we feel that the role of counselors and psychologists is very important here. The participants did report feeling a great deal of pressure to lose weight and found themselves struggling with feelings of frustration, guilt and self-doubt. They believed that losing weight was something they *had* to do and felt responsible for it. Although eating disorder symptomatology was not observed, they could develop in the future, a possibility that the participants themselves denied. Counselors who work with women experiencing weight dissatisfaction need to include family members and peers, identify the different roles played by them and take into account India's changing social, cultural and economic scenarios. So far Western influences have been considered responsible for the many recent changes seen in India's youth. Now academic discourse now needs to move towards understanding how we can address these issues in a way that empowers women.

In conclusion, we found that although body weight is visible and physical, because of the meanings invested in the women's bodies, weight dissatisfaction seemed to be as much a psychological experience for the participants as it was a physical one. For all the choices that the adolescents and young women may have felt that they had, being 'fat' was not one of them. It is clear that oppressive standards of body and beauty are as pervasive today as they have ever been. Jung & Forbes (2010) have suggested that

East Asian societies with their strong patriarchal traditions, rigid gender roles, and rapid social changes are particularly likely to adopt unrealistic standards of appearance and have high levels of body dissatisfaction. We suggest that this reasoning can be extended to certain Indian settings as well.

Like any qualitative research, this study has certain limitations. Firstly, the study is intended to elucidate women's experiences; however, it does not endeavor generalizability. Women's experiences of weight dissatisfaction may vary in accordance to socio-economic status, age, level of education, and exposure to Western conceptions of beauty. In addition, there are several sub-cultures within the Indian culture, and each may have different conceptions about women's beauty and bodies (Naidu, 1979). Secondly, we cannot ignore the possibility that there may have been aspects of their lives that the girls did not reveal and there may be more to their experiences than the present interviews captured. Finally, the possibility of researcher's bias cannot be ignored in a qualitative study. However reflexivity was an on-going part of the on the research process

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