Perspectives

5-1-2009

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United States

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December 2008
SOC 520
Professor Moran

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There is an epidemic happening in the United States. It is highly visible, yet it is still largely ignored. It affects women ninety percent of the time but can also affect men, and has been seen recently in younger and younger people (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). It is an epidemic of eating disorders, and anyone who has lived through the past few decades can see that it has gotten worse. This paper will discuss several ways in which our society has contributed to the increase in eating disorders, namely in the use of visual portrayals of extremely thin women, the proliferation of weight-loss advertising, and the effect of these on one's immediate socio-cultural network in continuing the obsession with weight. I will focus on women in this paper, though that is not to discount the men who are afflicted with eating disorders. In fact, eating disorders are increasingly affecting men and it is a very serious issue. It is a topic that deserves much more research and comparison with women's experiences. I will conclude this paper by discussing ways in which we might reverse this epidemic and what is already being done to prevent and eventually end eating disorders.

The Media's Portrayal of "Ultra-Thinness"

We in the United States live in a country that is obsessed with media and celebrities. In the last five to ten years or so, we have moved into an era where the exchange of information is faster than ever. This brings along a lot more opportunities for us to view advertising and entertainment news. Most magazines are online these days, and their headlines even cross into the "real news". We are bombarded with celebrity images and information. A lot of celebrity news and gossip, especially when it is about female celebrities, has shifted to center around physical appearance. The majority of our female celebrities are thin, and a lot of them are very thin. In addition, our beloved celebrities are largely (no pun intended) a lot thinner than

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celebrities used to be and are definitely thinner than the average American woman (Sypeck et al., 2004). This sends an unhealthy visual message to everyone, but to women in particular. Internally, the proliferation of super-thin female celebrities and models is interpreted as the ideal image of what a woman should look like. Celebrities and models exude a sort of power over people, partly because they are so highly visible in our society. There is a meaning behind the "look" of celebrities and models. It is the message that these women are powerful, they are sexy, they are beautiful; they are wanted (Ahern et al., 2008). Young women are especially susceptible to be influenced by these messages and to want these attributes for themselves. It is hard to avoid the images; they are everywhere. Images of celebrities and models are in our grocery stores, our newspapers, on our billboards, and in our doctor's offices (how ironic!). This constant bombardment of pictures of thin women, along with the almost complete absence of any pictures of big or even average-sized women eventually has an effect on the viewer, which is that it increases women's dissatisfaction with their bodies as well as their drive to become thin (Vandereycken, 2006). These are two symptoms of an eating disorder. If a woman was already experiencing some amount of self-consciousness about her body, these messages she receives from the media could easily lead her to develop an eating disorder.

Social comparison Theory has been studied extensively and states that people tend to want to improve themselves and are drawn to look towards similar others for examples of what they should strive to be like (Hesse-Biber et al.,2006; Bissel, 2006; Vandereycken, 2006). Therefore, if a woman is feeling at all self-conscious about herself and/or her appearance, she is likely to be affected by constantly seeing women who look and seem similar to her in magazines and movies. If the only apparent difference between them is that the women in the media are very thin, that female viewer is likely to conclude that the only thing standing between her and

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them is that she is not as thin as they are.   Logically, then, she is going to try to become like them: to lose weight and be thin. This is an unnecessary and unrealistic expectation that women may put on themselves as a direct result of exposure to media images. Celebrities and models live very different lives than average people do.   We do not often really comprehend the access that celebrities have to personal trainers or the time they have to perfect their bodies.

The media also portrays thinness under a guise of health, and as an attainable status for any woman who works hard enough (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). This is a very damaging message for women to be given. The will of a woman who has an eating disorder is very strong. It can also be supported by this feeling that she can achieve her goal of being thin if only she is good and strong enough. We know this is a very unhealthy idea and that healthy women come in all shapes and sizes. Physical attributes have little to do with a woman's character, however, our media is sending us the opposite message.

Many studies have been done about the effects of the media on women and how it might lead to symptoms of eating disorders. One such study was examining how the viewing of fashion magazines affected middle school and high-school-aged girls (Field, 2000). In administering a detailed survey, this study found among middle school-aged girls that viewing fashion magazines influenced them to consider a thin body type as the *ideal* body type. This seems to be the initial effect of viewing media that continuously and predominantly displays abnormally thin women. As for the high-school-aged girls, a correlation was made between idealizing and desiring the body types that were seen repeatedly in the fashion magazines to the point of development of symptoms of eating disorders (Field, 2000). We can thus conclude that the internalization of the images in the girls' minds was that this body type was what they should strive to have. In order to get that specific "look", they would have to take some measures to

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alter their physical appearance, therefore leading to symptoms of eating disorders. These may include: strictly monitoring and/or decreasing food intake, putting some (often many or most) foods "off limits" or labeling them "bad", binging and purging, exercising obsessively, lying about eating, and only eating alone.

The findings in this study follow the pattern of Cultivation Theory- another perspective on the effects of media in explaining the causes of eating disorders. This theory states that as media consumption increases, the viewer is increasingly convinced that the images being viewed are realistic (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). Cultivation Theory has been found to be true even in studies where the viewers are informed of the ways in which the media alter images to create impossibly "perfect" people (Bissell, 2006). The practice of airbrushing is now standard in most print media, and the overwhelming amount of airbrushed images that we are exposed to can almost guarantee that our young women (and women of all ages) are comparing their bodies to unrealistic and unattainable bodies which they are seeing. Even if you decide to take some sort of proactive measure to decrease your media exposure, for example, by deciding you will not buy fashion magazines, you cannot avoid viewing them. They and their images are everywhere.

Weight-Loss Promotion in the Media

Our society has come to a point where it presents a bold dichotomy to women: it urges us to consume more and more products, (including food products), while at the same time promoting a message of assumption that we are always on a diet and trying to lose weight (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). Both the weight-loss and fitness industries have seen enormous increases in production and sales in recent decades; in fact, from 1990 to 2001, there was a 101% increase in people who exercise at gyms and do so at least 100 days per year (Hesse-Biber et al.,

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2006). Weight-loss promotion is everywhere, and it comes in many forms: weight-loss plans and support groups, diets, fasts, cleanses, pills, creams, supplements, and even food itself. Women are constantly confronted with the message that they need to lose weight, and it seems that they are eventually buying into the hype, since the weight-loss industry is booming. The ideas of weight-loss and being thin are often mixed up with health and wellbeing. Being thin is portrayed as equal to being healthy, being happy, being strong, and being powerful.

The strong message of the necessity to be thin and therefore to lose weight only supplements the ultra-thin body ideal which women are being given from the media. After constantly viewing thin women in the media who appear to be happy, healthy, sexy and desirable, many women become convinced that they must change their bodies and become thin as well. Being thin becomes the solution to whatever problems they may have in their life. And if a woman is not naturally thin, how can she become thin other than drastically altering her diet (or nearly eliminating food from her life altogether) and her exercise regimen. It is easy to see how excessive weight-loss promotion compounded upon the exorbitant amount of images of very thin women can strongly influence a woman to develop an eating disorder.

This exploitation of images of women's bodies benefits both the companies who are selling the weight-loss products as well as the companies selling fashion and beauty products that are being advertised. It is good for their business, but it is very dangerous for women. The more strongly women are convinced that they must look a certain way or be a certain size, the easier it is going to be to sell them beauty products, clothing, and aids in losing weight.   Therefore, certain companies are benefiting from the presence of eating disorders in our society. Some have even claimed that this focus on women and thinness in the media stems from our male-dominated society feeling threatened by women entering the workforce and gradually gaining

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equality in education with men (Hesse-Biber et al, 2006). This is a bold claim to make; these companies are also boldly exploiting women. By targeting women in weight-loss advertising as well as in fashion and beauty advertising, our media are stating the belief that women are weak and susceptible to this influence to conform to a specific physical appearance. And largely, that has proven to be true with the epidemic of eating disorders we are facing in this country, as well as the general obsession with weight that has become pervasive throughout the nation.

Weight-loss advertising, which is overwhelmingly focused towards women, is very dangerous for women's health and wellbeing. It is a direct factor in influencing women to develop eating disorders. It also goes hand-in-hand with fashion and beauty advertising, which depicts mostly women who are lower-than-average weight, in convincing women that they must lose weight and be thin to be not only happy but acceptable in our society. The false belief that any woman can be the "ideal" size, whatever that may be (is a size zero small enough?) is also a very dangerous message. Of course, many women can *become* thin by starving themselves, but if they are not naturally that small size, there are two things that will happen. The first one is that a woman will be completely consumed with maintaining her unnaturally thin size at the expense of almost everything else in her life. The second is that she will die. Eating disorders can be maintained (at the expense of a healthy and balanced life), they can kill, or the person can go back to being a bigger, more normal size for their body, but one that they believe will bring upon them a great burden. Eating disorders are both highly disruptive and unhealthy but also very dangerous. Clearly, this is hardly a trivial issue in our society.

The Influence of Socio-Cultural Networks

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We have seen how images and advertising in our media collaborate to affect women's beliefs about their bodies and what they should look like, and especially what size they should be. The unrealistic depiction of air-brushed, unnaturally thin women sends the message that every woman must be thin in order to be happy and successful. (Ahern et al, 2008). Weight loss ads are more direct and reinforce the idea of being thin and how to *become* thin. The solution these ads offer is to buy and use their product, which can be unhealthy and even dangerous in many different ways. Many women get caught in the cycle of diets that prove to be fruitless and often even damaging to their bodies. They frequently end up gaining back any weight they may have lost. Diet pills are a very unnatural way to try to lose weight, and can be dangerous if unregulated or abused. Often unconsciously, women interpret these media messages as a guide to determining their self-worth, and thinness has become the commodity of value (Shorter et al., 2008).

If so many women are being affected by eating disorders, or at least by some sort of symptom of an eating disorder or feeling of dissatisfaction with her body, this means that these issues are probably being discussed *among* women. Discussions of diet, weight loss, size and appearance have become part of the daily conversations among women as well as in many different varieties of social groups: "Weight concern and preoccupation have become normative for a large sector of the people in the U.S." (Hesse-Biber et al, 2006) These days, it seems as though everyone is frequently talking about the newest diet, which is inevitably accompanied by a book or some other product available for sale (again, there are people profiting from the media's negative influence on women's body image.). The discussion itself is a by-product of the media's ideal, thin image of women, and it fuels the obsession of women feeling the need to be thin. Women greatly influence each other, and it is no different with this issue. Peers and

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even family therefore become another source of pressure for women to be thin (Vandereycken, 2006).

The normalization of eating disorders is a very dangerous phenomenon. Since the talk about weight, diet, thinness, and all the other topics that accompany these ideas have become so commonplace; actually *being* thin has come to be highly valued. Thinness has come to be equated with self-control and to symbolize strength of will and strength of character. The influence of one's peers can be very strong. Women are often encouraged and even rewarded when they lose weight (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). This perpetuates the idea that the media are giving us that thin is good and fat is bad. We also label food this way. How often do you say or hear someone else say that they have been "bad" because they had dessert one day, or "good" because they have not? It is these kinds of associations that fuel the epidemic of eating disorders. If being thin is the goal, can someone be too thin? Someone who is suffering from an eating disorder usually thinks that they can never be thin enough. Peers, friends, and family can often encourage a woman who is losing weight, whether they do it purposefully or not, by saying that she looks good. Again, this is equating thinness with goodness, and this type of "positive" response can be very dangerous.   The woman may be driven by this encouragement to continue to lose weight, eventually developing an eating disorder. The social consensus that thin women are sexy, strong, healthy, and have a lot of self-control combined with the amount of weight-loss promotion we find in our media leads to a lot of peer pressure for women to be thin and even underweight.

Conclusion

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Eating disorders among women are a huge problem in our society today. Girls and women are starving themselves and abusing their bodies in order to achieve an unnatural body type that is depicted everywhere in our media. We find this image of the "ultra-thin" woman in television, magazines, advertisements, and exemplified by our celebrities. The image is everywhere. Along with this unnatural body type is the message that being thin will make you happy and successful. Thinness is equated with power, self-control, sexiness, and health. This last association is particularly damaging, as there are many companies who advertise their products as an aid to health as well as to weight loss. Of course, not being overweight is healthy, so for someone who needs to slim down for health reasons, losing weight is a healthy action to take. However, it is this association between being thin and being healthy that can be very damaging to women's psyches. There is no certain size that a woman needs to be in order to be healthy, so if a woman who is a size 8 is made to feel "fat" by the message she is getting from the media and feels she needs to lose weight, that is an unhealthy message.

The media's promotion of women needing to be thin does not cause every woman to develop an eating disorder, but it does seem to influence a great number of women who have eating disorders. In addition, our society's promotion of women being thin has made its way into almost everyone's thoughts and conversations. Whether or not we enjoy celebrity knowledge and pop culture, these images affect us because they are so prevalent in our everyday lives. The discussion of women's bodies is so common that we often do not even realize that we have normalized this sort of talk. We ask friends "have you lost weight?" and intend it as a compliment. Little may we know that that friend is just beginning to develop an eating disorder and this sort of talk can encourage someone in this illness.

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The media's influence on women is a complex one. The images of women in magazines, advertising, television and movies are overwhelmingly of thinner-than-average women. Many depict women who are, in fact, dangerously thin. This sends the message to women that thin women are desirable, sexy, and successful. Who does not want to have these attributes? Also in our media is the proliferation of advertisements about how to lose weight and lose it fast. Many commercials also have subtle messages that promote weight loss, and these commercials often depict a woman who does not appear to need to lose weight. These weight-loss advertisements reinforce the message that women need to be thin, and therefore that most women need to be on diets and losing weight.

Clearly, we have a problem. Our media is sending a very unhealthy message to women and it is leading to a cultural obsession with thinness, weight, and appearance. This phenomenon is leading many women to develop eating disorders. It seems as though the media are not the sole influence in the epidemic of eating disorders, but rather that it is a very strong determining factor. Many studies have found that the media affect women by leading them to believe, first of all, that the images depicted in the media are realistic, and second to desire to look like the women they see in magazines and on television. This inevitably causes the majority of women, who are not naturally thin like the media's image of women, to seek some way to lose weight. This can become an obsession and lead to an eating disorder. The social reinforcement that being thin and losing weight is always a positive thing only prolongs the epidemic.

Although there is a plethora of research that exists today on eating disorders, there needs to be more comprehensive studies done on the causes of this illness. The studies I referenced in this paper were all very good observations on the effects of the media in the development of eating disorders in women. However, I believe that these types of studies could be more

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beneficial if they were more long-term, rather than simple observation of media and taking surveys on the effects right away. Perhaps there is a need for more funding to go into this type of research, since it seems as though most of the studies were done on a short-term basis. I did not encounter any research that would disprove my research question, and not admit that the media influences women toward developing eating disorders.

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