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'And yet I'm an adult now'. The influence of parental criticism on women's body satisfaction/dissatisfaction during emerging adulthood

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ABSTRACT

Body dissatisfaction is widely recognized as an important public health concern mainly for women because of its increasing incidence worldwide. The aim of this exploratory study was to test the predictive role of family influence on body satisfaction (BS) among young Italian women, during a decade conceptualized as 'emerging adulthood'. Instruments designed to assess BS, appearance-focused parental comments, maternal and paternal criticism were administered to 688 women aged between 18 and 28 years (M age = 23.40; SD = 2.33). Two regression analyses were used with life satisfaction levels, parental comments, and maternal/paternal criticism as independent variables to explain variance in BS for younger (18–23 years) and older (24–28 years) women. The data reveal an interesting difference in the influence of parental criticism on BS depending on the age cohort: maternal criticism negatively predicts BS in younger women, while paternal criticism is a risk factor for BS in older women.

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KEYWORDS

Parental comments; body satisfaction; maternal criticism; paternal criticism; emerging adulthood

Introduction

Body image is considered to be the mental portrait that individuals form their physical selves (Rudd & Lennon, 2001). Body dissatisfaction is the negative evaluation of body appearance or specific body features that the individual may develop in relation to his or her body image (Stice & Shaw, 2002). Gender difference has been widely described with respect to body image satisfaction, with women reporting higher levels of dissatisfaction than males (Biolcati, Ghigi, et al., 2017; Jackson, Johnson, Croker, & Wardle, 2015; Stice & Whitenton, 2002). Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) suggests that women of Western culture are repeatedly exposed to body objectification and that their appearance is used by others as a way of estimating their personal value. Women culturally internalize the belief that their self-worth is highly based on the way other people view them, and this, in turn, amplifies the relevance of body image satisfaction for their well-being. A number of studies indicate that women in Western cultures maintain a body ideal that is thinner than their current body (e.g. Nelson & Gidycz, 1993; Wardle, Bindra, Fairclough, & Westcombe, 1993) and overestimate the degree to which other males and females prefer women who are thinner (Cohn & Adler, 1992; Jacobi & Cash, 1994). As widely recognized, body dissatisfaction is strongly bound to dysfunctional outcomes such as maladaptive behaviour aimed at controlling bodily shape and weight (Heinberg, 2001; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2007). One of the most widely accepted reasons is that body dissatisfaction results in excessive dieting, which in turn increases the risk for the onset and maintenance of anorexic and bulimic pathologies (e.g. Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Conversely, women

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who were more satisfied with their appearances and weights were more satisfied with their lives overall (Sandhu & Frederick, 2015).

A growing corpus of work has investigated body dissatisfaction among adolescents (e.g. Voelker, Reel, & Greenleaf, 2015) and college students (e.g. Lowery et al., 2005), but a clear photograph of family influences on body satisfaction during 'emerging adulthood' has not yet appeared. Emerging adulthood is a new conception of development which ranges from the late teens through the twenties and differs demographically, subjectively, and in terms of identity explorations from adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Despite the numerous changes in identity and self-development during this long phase of life, little is known about body dissatisfaction trajectories when daughters are likely to leave their family to explore new developmental tasks. In particular, a review by Rodgers and Chabrol (2009) confirmed the paucity of studies involving samples of young adults and highlighted the salience of research on respective roles of mother and father in the transmission of body image dissatisfaction. The family is the principal social institution through which values, behaviours, and attitudes are transmitted over time (Parke & Buriel, 2008). In general, parents can influence their daughter's behaviour through modelling and contingencies placed upon behaviour via rewards and punishments. Specifically, negative comments and criticism about appearance or weight have been linked to increased body dissatisfaction in daughters (Baker, Whisman, & Brownell, 2000; Smolak, Levine, & Schermer, 1999; Vincent & McCabe, 2000). In particular, Kluck (2010) reports the link between appearance-focused family culture (comments and parental criticism about body weight/size) and body dissatisfaction in college students. Parental criticism about appearance from fathers and mothers was, in fact, associated with increased body image dissatisfaction especially in women (Schwartz, Phares, Tantleff-Dunn, & Thompson, 1999). On the other hand, research investigating media, parent and peer influence on women's body dissatisfaction found that while media predicted body dissatisfaction, parental or peer criticism did not (e.g. Hardit & Hannum, 2012; Lev-Ari, Baumgarten-Katz, & Zohar, 2014). Therefore, we start from mixed results regarding body satisfaction as predicted by family influence. Furthermore, the majority of studies on family context and body image have focused on the mother–daughter relationship, rather than on combinations of the gender-specific parent–child dyads, namely mother–daughter and father–daughter (Taniguchi & Aune, 2013). Recent studies (Chng & Fassnacht, 2016; Wansink, Latimer, & Pope, 2017) suggested that influence from both parents via comments continues to be a relevant issue in young adulthood. It is well known that parental messages about body size and shape are significant predictors of body satisfaction for adolescents (Holsen, Jones, & Birkeland, 2012) but less is known about the specificity of late adolescence and early adulthood in terms of family influences on women's body satisfaction. Specifically, the effect of mother and father criticism on body satisfaction during late adolescence and early adulthood, two stages of life in which women are likely to be living away from their parents, remains unclear (e.g. Hardit & Hannum, 2012).

For the aforementioned reasons, this study adds to previous research by exploring separately if and how parental comments and mother and father criticism influence women's body satisfaction (BS) during emerging adulthood.

Objectives

The study was conducted to gain a deeper insight into the impact of family influence on body satisfaction among younger and older women. Specifically, in this study, we pursue two principal objectives.

- (1) The first purpose is to investigate the relation between family influence, body satisfaction and life satisfaction in young women of two age cohorts.
- (2) The second goal is to compare younger and older women on the predictive role of life satisfaction levels, parental comments, and mother and father criticism on body satisfaction.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 688 young women between the ages of 18 and 28 years ($M = 23.40$, $SD = 2.33$). All the participants were native Italian speakers born in the North (36%, $n = 248$), the Centre (27.8%, $n = 191$) and the South (36.2%, $n = 249$) of Italy. Two hundred and ninety participants (42.1%) attended the 1st Cycle University Degree, 221 (32.1%) the second Cycle, while 177 (25.7%) did not attend university. With regards their current sentimental status, 409 (59.4%) had a partner, 263 (38.2%) were single and 16 (2.3%) were married.

Procedure

Participants were recruited online, using an online questionnaire built with Google Forms, a survey-generating tool. The sample was contacted via the most popular social media, such as Facebook, and was asked to answer some questions on parental influence, body satisfaction and life satisfaction. In accordance with the standard procedure for minimal-risk online surveys, the informed consent of the participants was implied through survey completion. No personal identifying information was collected. No fee was offered. The data were collected in 2018. In order to check and prevent multiple responses from re-entering the survey site, the participant's IP address was monitored. The study was conducted in agreement with the ethical norms laid down by the Italian National Psychological Association.

Material

Participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire assessing the following areas:

Parental comments. Appearance-focused family culture that was measured by an ad-hoc item 'How often in your family is there talk of physical appearance?' Scores ranged from 1 ('Never') to 6 ('Always').

Parental criticism towards the respondent about her body appearance and weight was measured by means of two ad-hoc items: 'How often does your mother make critical remarks about your physical appearance or your body weight?' 'How often does your father make critical remarks about your physical appearance or your body weight?' Scores ranged from 1 ('Never') to 6 ('Always'). The Cronbach alpha value in the present sample was $\alpha = .73$.

Body Satisfaction. BS was assessed using the 'body attitudes/feelings' subscale of the Body Investment Scale (BIS; Orbach & Mikulincer, 1998). The BIS subscale consists of six items (e.g. items such as 'I am satisfied with my appearance' and 'I feel anger toward my body' (reversed)) assessed on a score ranging from 1 ('Do not agree at all') to 5 ('Strongly agree'). The Cronbach alpha value in the present sample was $\alpha = .92$.

Satisfaction level was measured using four ad-hoc items on a 5-point Likert scale (from 'not satisfied at all' to 'fully satisfied') with four areas: academic/work performance, relationship with the family of origin, relationships with friends, and sentimental relationships.

Analytical procedures

First, the frequencies and means were computed for each variable. Then, differences between age cohorts (18–23; 24–28 years) were calculated using Chi-square test and ANOVA analysis. In order to describe the relationships between the dimensions investigated, Pearson's correlations were performed for each group. Finally, a linear regression analysis was run for both younger and older women.

Results

The sample was first split into two age cohorts: the 'younger group' ($N = 325$), aged from 18 to 23 ($M = 21.33$) and the 'older group' ($N = 363$) aged from 24 to 28 ($M = 25.25$). The younger group

was then compared with the older one. With regard to personal data, there is no significant difference between the two groups with respect to region of provenance. Regarding level of education, Chi-square test showed that in the younger group there were more women attending the 1st Cycle Degree (49.2% vs 16.83%) and in the older group there were more women attending the 2nd Cycle Degree (44.9% vs 17.8%; $\chi^2 = 107.84$, $df = 3$; $p = .000$). With regard to sentimental status, there was a higher percentage of single women in the younger group (57.4% vs 42.6%; $\chi^2 = 25.72$, $df = 2$; $p = .000$).

In general, as can be seen in Table 1 (left side), descriptive statistics showed that all participants have a high average of life satisfaction and a medium-high level of BS. In the overall sample, the women declared a low level of parental appearance-focused comments and of mother and father criticism.

ANOVA analysis (see Table 1) shows that the younger group has a significantly lower satisfaction level average in three areas of life (Academic/work performance, Relationship with the family and Sentimental relationships) than the older women. In addition, the former have lower BS than the latter. No difference was found between the groups concerning parental comments and mother/father criticism on body appearance and weight.

Pearson correlation analyses showed that BS positively correlated with all the life satisfaction levels and negatively with parental comments and maternal and paternal criticism for both age cohorts (see Table 2).

Linear regression analysis was used to determine prominent predictors of BS for the younger group (Study 1, see Table 3) and for the older group (Study 2, see Table 4). The dependent variable was the BS score, while the independent variables were Parental comments, Maternal and Paternal criticism, and Satisfaction levels for each age cohort.

Study 1 suggested that 23% of the variance in BS could be explained by four significant predictors, namely Maternal criticism, Academic/work performance, Friendship and Sentimental relationship satisfaction levels [$F(7, 325) = 12.53$, $p < .001$]. The aforementioned satisfaction levels were positive predictors except for Maternal criticism, which negatively predicted BS.

Table 1. Mean and ANOVA differences for age group among study variables.

Measures	M	SD	M Younger (N = 325)	M Older (N = 363)	F
Body satisfaction (6, 30)	20.46	6.26	19.70	21.14	9.18**
Parental comments (1, 6)	2.73	1.11	2.79	2.68	1.70
Maternal criticism (1, 6)	2.41	1.37	2.45	2.37	.523
Paternal criticism (1, 6)	2.02	1.23	2.07	1.97	1.055
Satisfaction Level (1, 5)					
Academic/work performance	3.75	.96	3.58	3.90	19.80***
Family of origin	3.92	1.07	3.79	4.04	9.69**
Relationship with friends	3.59	1.03	3.52	3.66	3.09
Sentimental relationships	3.42	1.38	3.17	3.64	20.43***

Note. Numbers in parentheses represent scale range.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Pearson correlation coefficients among all the variables for the younger group and older group.

Measures	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
(1) Parental comments	–	.455**	.395**	–.297**	–.084	.038	–.041	–.096
(1) Maternal criticism	.472**	–	.491**	–.261**	–.077	–.147**	–.033	–.123*
(1) Paternal criticism	.408**	.661**	–	–.319**	–.046	–.173**	–.212**	–.152**
(1) Body satisfaction	–.282**	–.364**	–.270**	–	.183**	.213**	.190**	.320**
(1) Academic/work performance	–.100	–.160**	–.147**	.245**	–	.259**	.198**	.189**
(1) Family of origin	.019	–.198	–.232**	.132*	.164**	–	.262**	.268**
(1) Relationship with friends	.048	–.037	–.006	.190**	.134*	.318**	–	.247**
(1) Sentimental relationships	–.181**	–.124*	–.043	.235**	.072	.049	.057	–

Note. Values below the diagonal are for the Younger group (Study 1). Values above the diagonal are for the Older group (Study 2). ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

Table 3. Results of regression analysis of body satisfaction study 1 (N = 325).

Dependent variable	Independent variables	β	t-value	p
Body satisfaction	Parental comments	-.10	-1.75	.081
	Maternal criticism	-.22	-3.14	.002
	Paternal criticism	-.05	-.75	.455
	Academic/work performance	.18	3.36	.001
	Family of origin	-.02	-.28	.780
	Relationship with friends	.15	2.85	.005
	Sentimental relationships	.15	2.84	.005

β = Standardized coefficients.

Table 4. Results of regression analysis of body satisfaction study 2 (N = 363).

Dependent variable	Independent variables	β	t-value	p
Body satisfaction	Parental comments	-.18	-3.24	.001
	Maternal criticism	-.06	-1.03	.305
	Paternal criticism	-.16	-2.70	.007
	Academic/work performance	.09	1.69	.091
	Family of origin	-.07	1.34	.181
	Relationship with friends	.04	.71	.478
	Sentimental relationships	.22	4.35	.000

β = Standardized coefficients.

With regards the older group, Study 2 showed that 23% of the variance in BS could be explained by different significant predictors: specifically, Parental comments and Paternal criticism negatively predicted BS and satisfaction with sentimental relationship positively predicted satisfaction with body image [$F(7, 363) = 14.06, p < .001$].

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the predictive role of family influence on body satisfaction among a large sample of Italian women aged 18 to 28 years, a lifespan period defined as emerging adulthood. The sample was divided into two age groups that refer to different stages of a woman's development: the end of adolescence and early (or young) adulthood. Specifically, we were interested in investigating group specificities in family influence, BS and life Satisfaction levels. Moreover, the study aimed to investigate if and how life satisfaction, parental comments on body appearance and mother and father criticism influence body satisfaction in the two age cohorts: younger (18–23 years) and older (24–28 years) women.

With regard to group differences, younger women show *lower levels of satisfaction in academic/job performance*, in their *relationships with the family of origin* and in the area of *sentimental relationships*. The transition between late adolescence and early adulthood implies really perceiving a greater precariousness in the main life areas mentioned above. The younger women seem to perceive more difficulties than the older, perhaps because they are still in the critical developmental age of the end of adolescence when the task of managing a responsible independence usually begins and the sense of identity is steadily reshaping (Kroger, 2015). Young adulthood is characterized by the search for educational and employment opportunities and by the tendency to expand the social circle outward, e.g. with the development of significant relationships (Collins & Laursen, 2004). In addition to stressful circumstances related to academic performances, late adolescents may have to cope with the task of taking on more responsibilities without having yet learned the skills of adulthood (Biolcati, Agostini et al., 2017). Here, a central challenge is separating from the home and managing independent living. Yet late adolescents frequently feel conflicting emotions about leaving the safety and security of the home. Asserting one's independence means distancing oneself from mother and father. Sometimes, for young people, being critical, feeling ambivalent emotions, or even showing dissatisfaction towards their parents can be useful in this respect. Last but not least,

adolescents develop the disposition to increase sexual interests, fall in love and form intimate romantic relationships (Zimmer-Gembeck, 2002), even if most dating only last a few weeks or months, and this can be a source of dissatisfaction.

Moreover, our results showed that younger women are less satisfied with their body image than their older counterparts. Appearance-focused pressure is particularly felt by young women, for whom the social pressure to have an ideal body and the media-imposed standards of thinness are more powerful (Tiggemana 2011). An explanation for this result might be that younger women believe that males want someone thinner than they actually indicate, whereas older women are much more accurate at guessing what the opposite gender really wants (Demarest & Allen, 2000). It is well known that younger women (e.g. Jacobi & Cash, 1994) overestimate the degree to which males prefer women who are thinner while, with increasing age, they may have more realistic expectations about what is possible for them. Indeed, researchers (Demarest & Allen, 2000) found that this 'misperception' was greatest in their younger participants (under 25 years old), whereas older participants were much more accurate in their assessment of what the opposite sex found most attractive (Tiggemann, 2004). Additionally, during this phase of age women are more susceptible to social comparison. Research suggests that comparing oneself unfavourably to another based on appearance may lead to dissatisfaction with one's own appearance (for a review, see Myers & Crowther, 2009). Furthermore, previous research has suggested that general aspects of relationship dissatisfaction are related to higher levels of body dissatisfaction in women (Juarez & Pritchard, 2012).

On the other hand, during emerging adulthood, women aged 24–28 are in an advanced stage of development, characterized by a normative trend towards maturity, with more stability on personality traits (Blonigen, Carlson, Hicks, Krueger, & Iacono, 2008), and less uncertainty in such interrelated domains as education, employment and family formation, and therefore less conflict. Notwithstanding levels of independence and individuation vary considerably within these areas (Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark, & Gordon, 2003), they have often found a better place in society, are engaged in more stable sentimental relationships, and have partly solved the conflicts of separation from the family. During the transition to adulthood, the increase in maturity is accompanied by the assumption of responsibility for oneself, the ability to make autonomous decisions and become increasingly self-sufficient. These experiences, when positive, can improve self-esteem and serve as a protective factor against external pressures on body shape (O'dea, 2004). Furthermore, with increasing age, women become more appreciative of their body appearance and are able to better accept their body's imperfections (e.g. Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2011; Webster & Tiggemann, 2003).

As expected, body satisfaction positively correlated with all the life satisfaction levels, and negatively with parental comments and maternal and paternal criticism for both age cohorts. In accordance with the Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), it is understandable that life satisfaction, which is defined as a person's evaluation of his or her quality of life as a whole, may be highly related to body image. Moreover, family pressure, in terms of critical comments, continues to have a negative impact on women regardless of the lifespan stage they are going through. Besides, it is well known that close and supporting relationships with parents contribute to filial psychological well-being (Roberts & Bengtson, 1993).

However, if family influence, in general, continues to play an important relationship with body satisfaction, and younger and older woman do not differ in terms of parental criticism scores, the predictive power of the examined variables shows a significant difference between the involvement of the mother and of the father at different ages. While maternal criticism only predicts BS for younger women, paternal criticism is predictive of BS exclusively in older women. This data is particularly interesting and suggests the influence of a specific parental figure as a risk factor for body dissatisfaction in relation to the age group concerned. Previous findings reveal that maternal and paternal influences on adolescent well-being vary by the gender of parent and the son/daughter (Barber & Thomas, 1986; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985), and such difference persists during the transition to adulthood. Based on our results, we can assume that younger daughters are more sensitive to maternal influence because, in late adolescence, the mother–

daughter relationship is still very close and permeated by the emotional involvement built in childhood. Some researchers (e.g. Taniguchi & Aune, 2013) argued that the same-gender parent is the child's point of reference when developing his or her gender identity, and a child is more sensitive to appraisal from the same-gender rather than the opposite-gender parent, especially during adolescence.

A limited but growing corpus of research on body image has investigated father–daughter relationships (e.g. Kluck, 2010). Commonly reported within the limited father–daughter research is the positive influence a father can have on the self-esteem of his daughter (Liu, 2008). Specifically, the study by Keery, Van den Berg, and Thompson (2004) found that, even after controlling for maternal teasing, paternal criticism was significantly associated with negative outcomes including body dissatisfaction. It is plausible that, as daughters grow up and join the emerging adulthood, the father plays the most important role. He becomes a leading figure towards access to the social and working world and he serves as an identity model when the daughter chooses a partner. So paternal criticism can have a greater impact on the daughter's BS.

Moreover, in the older group, appearance-focused parental comments, namely talking about body appearance as a 'family value', also negatively affect the BS of daughters. Having a family where physical appearance is a frequent subject of conversation could be a stable influence factor for daughters even if they 'are adults now'. Future longitudinal studies should help to support these assumptions.

However, while parental involvement with daughters forms a basis for well-being in adulthood, it is not the sole predictor of BS. Indeed, our results also highlight age-specific protective factors with respect to BD: for the younger group academic performance, relationships with friends and sentimental relationships provide protection from BD. In the older group, only a positive sentimental involvement with a partner positively predicts body satisfaction. Although body satisfaction was positively related to life satisfaction levels and negatively with family influence for the entire sample, the psychological strategies of women who were older might

protect their self-concept from the many influences on body dissatisfaction (Webster & Tiggemann, 2003). This result seems reasonable and attests that older women relativize their body image and are less likely to consider their physical appearance as central to their overall self-worth (Tiggemann & Lacey, 2009).

Limitations and implications

The findings of this research must be considered in the light of important limitations such as the cross-sectional design and tools. First, this was an exploratory study with correlational rather than causal implications. The correlational design, as well as the statistical artifice of division into groups, limits the interpretation of the data, and causation can only be inferred with caution. That is, although the results suggest statistical predictive effects, the hypothesis needs to be more properly tested in a longitudinal model.

Moreover, our regression model only accounted for 23% of the variance in BS for each group. This means that other predictors lead to BS, which future studies should consider.

Next, the results are limited to the daughters' declared perceptions of family influences (comments and parental criticism) and the study used only a single item that had not been validated to measure family influence. In order to determine the validity of the study's assumptions, it is important for future studies to include multigenerational reports and validated tools.

Despite its limitations, this study makes a significant contribution to understanding the parental influence on daughters' BS during emerging adulthood. The results show that both mothers and fathers play a significant role in their daughter's body satisfaction, but differently for gender-specific parent–age cohort combinations.

For future research, identifying specific subpopulations of youth based on their prospects for the transition to adulthood has great relevance for youth welfare policy and practice relating to support

and guidance (Hartmann & Swartz, 2006). Indeed, this study supports the assumption that parental comments on body appearance and criticism should be targeted by prevention programmes on body dissatisfaction. Several authors (e.g. Maor & Cwikel, 2016) argued that the same conditions that make the family influence a vehicle for the transmission of negative messages about body image also offer the opportunity for the development of body self-acceptance. The education parenting strategies should promote competing counter-discourses of body image. Exposure to alternative discourses regarding the meaning of appearance, body shape and gender could be central to prevent body dissatisfaction. Treatment of the consequences of body dissatisfaction, e.g. eating problems, should strongly take into account family relationships and appearance-focused comments (Miller-Day & Marks, 2006; Taniguchi & Aune, 2013). Finally, practitioners should also promote therapeutic interventions specifically focused on reducing the impact of perceived parental criticism on body image (Kluck, 2010), such as techniques that increase the cognitive dissonance a young woman feels towards the thin-ideal (Stice, Chase, Stormer, & Appel, 2001), and include in their therapies interventions for addressing the appearance-focused family culture.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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