

Selected Studies for Social Norms and Body Image

Title: **Body Image Disturbance and the Social Norms Approach: An Integrative Review of the Literature**

Authors: [Bergstrom, Rochelle Lea](#); [Neighbors, Clayton](#)

Source: Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 2006, 25, 9, 975-1000, Guilford Publications

Abstract: This article merges two existing literatures: the body image literature and the social norms literature. Body image disturbance, which is known to be related to the development of eating disorders, continues to be an important area of study, particularly among college women. Perceived norms are known to be related to the occurrence of a variety of behaviors and attitudes, including heavy drinking and body image disturbance. Not only do existing norms influence behavior, but misperceptions regarding actual norms, which occur for a variety of reasons, are known to predict behavior as well. Interventions aimed at correcting normative misperceptions and thereby reducing problematic behaviors have shown promising results. Because normative misperceptions regarding norms for attractive body image predict eating disordered behaviors, applying intervention strategies based on correcting perceptions of the norm may prove to be a fruitful endeavor.

Title: **"I'm Not as Thin as You Think I Am": The Development and Consequences of Feeling Discrepant From the Thinness Norm**

Authors: C.A. Sanderson, J.M. Darley, C.S. Messinger

Source: [Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin](#), 2002, 2, 172-183, SAGE Publications

Abstract: This research examines whether people feel discrepant from others in terms of their attitudes and behaviors related to valued social norms as well as the development and consequences of this perceived discrepancy. To examine these issues, the authors chose a prevalent social norm, namely, the norm of thinness for women. As predicted, participants believed that, compared to themselves, other women are thinner, want to be thinner, exercise more frequently and for more aesthetic reasons (e.g., weight loss, attractiveness), and are more aware of and influenced by the thinness norm. Moreover, upper-class women showed more evidence of perceiving a discrepancy on behavioral norms than first-year women, and women who felt discrepant from the norm showed more symptoms of eating disorders. Discussion focuses on the theoretical and applied implications of these findings.

Title: **Do men find “bony” women attractive?:: Consequences of misperceiving opposite sex perceptions of attractive body image**

Authors: [Bergstrom,Rochelle L.](#); [Neighbors,Clayton](#); [Lewis,Melissa A.](#)

Source: [Body Image](#), 2004, 1, 2, 183-191

Abstract: Due to its role in the development and maintenance of eating disorders, body image perceptions and dissatisfaction continue to be an important area of study. Perceptions of attractive body images held by members of the opposite sex are an important determinant of body image satisfaction among both men and women. This research shows that men are accurate in their perceptions of what women find attractive among men, but women believe men want women to be thinner than men actually report. Furthermore, this inaccurate perception is associated with eating disorder symptomatology. The role of contingent self-worth was also assessed. Results indicate that individuals whose self-worth is more contingent on appearance-related standards experience more negative consequences than those who misperceive what the opposite sex finds attractive, but whose self-worth is less contingent on appearance. Implications for intervention are discussed.

Title: **The role of social norms and friends' influences on unhealthy weight-control behaviors among adolescent girls**

Authors: [Eisenberg,M.E.](#); [Neumark-Sztainer,D.](#); [Story,M.](#); [Perry,C.](#)

Source: [Soc.Sci.Med.](#), 2005, 60, 6, 1165-1173

Abstract: Dieting is common among adolescent girls and may place them at risk of using unhealthy weight-control behaviors (UWCBs), such as self-induced vomiting, laxatives, diet pills, or fasting. Research has suggested that social factors, including friends and broader cultural norms, may be associated with UWCBs. The present study examines the relationship between the school-wide prevalence of current weight loss efforts among adolescent girls, friends' dieting behavior, and UWCBs, and investigates differences in these associations across weight categories. Survey data were collected in 31 middle and high schools in ethnically and socio-economically diverse communities in Minnesota, USA. The response rate was 81.5%. Rates of UWCBs were compared across the spectrum of prevalence of trying to lose weight and friends' involvement with dieting, using chi squared analysis and multivariate logistic regression, controlling for demographic factors and clustering by school. Girls with higher body mass index (BMI) were more likely to engage in UWCBs than those of lower BMI. Multivariate models indicated that friends' dieting behavior was significantly associated with UWCBs for average weight girls (OR = 1.57, CI = 1.40-1.77) and moderately overweight girls (OR = 1.47, CI = 1.19-1.82). The school-wide prevalence of trying to lose weight was significantly, albeit modestly, related to UWCBs for average weight girls (15th-85th percentile; OR = 1.17, CI = 1.01-1.36), and marginally associated for modestly overweight girls (85th-95th percentile; OR = 1.21, CI = .97-1.50),

even after controlling for friends' dieting behaviors. The social influences examined here were not associated with UWCBs among underweight (95th percentile) girls. Findings suggest that social norms, particularly from within one's peer group, but also at the larger school level may influence UWCBs, particularly for average weight girls. Implications for school-based interventions to reduce UWCBs are discussed.

Title: **Pizza and pop and the student identity: the role of referent group norms in healthy and unhealthy eating.**

Authors: [Louis, W.](#); [Davies, S.](#); [Smith, J.](#); [Terry, D.](#)

Source: [J.Soc.Psychol.](#), 2007, 147, 1, 57-74

Abstract: Using the Theory of Planned Behavior (I. Ajzen, 1985, 1991) and referent group (student) norms and identification (D. J. Terry & M. A. Hogg, 1996), the authors longitudinally predicted healthy eating intentions and behavior in a sample of 137 university students. Specifically, attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control predicted intentions at Time 1, which predicted self-reported behavior at Time 2. There was also a link between intentions and observed behavior at Time 2. Beyond the planned behavior variables, referent group norms for university students' eating behavior interacted with participants' identification as students to predict healthy eating intentions. The authors discussed implications for researcher's conceptualization of normative influence and for interventions into this group's eating behavior.

Title: **Predicting adolescent eating and activity behaviors: the role of social norms and personal agency**

Authors: [Baker, C.W.](#); [Little, T.D.](#); [Brownell, K.D.](#)

Source: [Health Psychology](#), 2003, 22, 2, 189-198

Abstract: Guided by the theory of planned behavior, this 2-week longitudinal study examined health behaviors in a sample of 279 adolescents. Social norms and perceived behavioral control (PBC) were tested as predictors of self-reported intentions and behaviors in 2 domains, eating and physical activity. Differentiating, as opposed to aggregating, parent and peer norms provided unique information. For PBC, the authors distinguished global causality beliefs from self-related agency beliefs and intraself (effort, ability) from extraself (parents, teachers) means. Intraself agency beliefs strongly predicted healthy intentions, whereas intraself causality beliefs had a negative influence. Patterns differed somewhat across behaviors and gender. Results highlight theoretical issues and provide potential targets for research on health promotion programs for youth.

The following sites may also be of use to you:

1) H. Wesley Perkins and David W. Craig's "Body Weight and the Effects of Misperceived Norms on Personal Body Image in Adolescence: Results from an Online Assessment Tool for Secondary Schools" presentation:

Data are drawn from an online survey taken by students (N=5698) from seven middle and high schools. Results of four analyses are presented: 1) Body mass index distributions by gender and grade are reported in relation to healthy body mass ranges to assess the prevalence of under/overweight adolescents. 2) Perceptions of average male and female body masses are compared with actual average body masses at each school to assess the extent of misperception of body weight norms. 3) Students' subjective assessments of themselves as over/underweight are then compared to the objective standards. 4) Finally, discrepancies between actually being under/overweight and perceiving oneself to be under/over weight are assessed in relation to misperceptions of the actual peer norms. Implications for school health programs are discussed.

<http://www.alcoholeducationproject.org/current/bodyimageslides-2005.pdf>

2) Multiple studies in H. W. Perkins (ed.), *The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age Substance Abuse: A Handbook for Educators, Counselors, and Clinicians*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This resource offers educators, counselors, and clinicians a handbook for understanding and implementing an alternative to traditional methods for preventing substance abuse among young people. The "social norms" approach outlined in this book identifies young people's dramatic misperceptions about peers' norms and promotes accurate public reporting of actual positive norms that exist in all student populations. The social norms approach examines how phenomena beyond the individual's personality and personal values are important determinants of behavior and offers information about how these influences can be changed. Among the issues addressed by the contributors are specific techniques, programs, and field-tested results of the application of this method in a variety of school and community settings. This book shows how this approach works with different age groups and reveals the potential for applying a social norms approach, not only for problem drinking, smoking, and other substance abuse, but also for other areas of prevention work, including hate speech, sexual aggression, and eating disorders.