

What people tell you gets to you

Body Satisfaction and Peer Victimization in Early Adolescence

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Avhandling för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i psykologi, som med vederbörligt tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakulteten vid Göteborgs Universitet kommer att offentligas försvaras fredagen den 13 mars, 2009, kl. 10.00, sal F1, Psykologiska Institutionen, Haraldsgatan 1, Göteborg

Fakultetsopponent: Professor Linda Smolak, Department of Psychology, Kenyon College, Ohio, United States

This thesis consists of a summary and the following four papers, referred to in the text by their Roman numerals:

- I. Lunde, C., Friséén, A., & Hwang, C. P. (2006). Is peer victimization related to body esteem in 10-year-old girls and boys? *Body Image*, 3, pp. 25-33.
- II. Friséén, A., Lunde, C., & Hwang, C. P. (in press). Peer victimization and its relationships with perceptions of body composition. *Educational Studies*, 35.
- III. Lunde, C., Friséén, A., & Hwang, C. P. (2007). Ten-year-old girls' and boys' body composition and peer victimization experiences: Prospective associations with body satisfaction. *Body Image*, 4, pp. 11-28.
- IV. Lunde, C., Friséén, A., & Hwang, C. P. (2009). "Nobody loves you when you are fat and chubby". *Interviews on the continuum of body dissatisfaction*. Manuscript submitted for publication.



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Abstract

Lunde, C. (2009). *What people tell you gets to you. Body satisfaction and peer victimization in early adolescence*. Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Satisfaction with one's appearance and peer relationships, respectively, are salient components of adolescents' everyday lives. Difficulties in either of these domains may be detrimental to individuals' psychological well-being. Research within the body image field indicates that physical appearance is a recurring theme when children tease each other, and that such experiences may result in body dissatisfaction. For some early adolescents, peer victimization is so frequently experienced that it is referred to as bullying. The research presented in this dissertation attempts to disentangle the relationships between early adolescents' body dissatisfaction and experiences of peer victimization in terms of type and frequency. As more qualitative studies have been requested to move the body image field forward, an additional goal was to provide an in-depth approach to body dissatisfaction. In **Study I**, the associations of a range of peer victimization experiences and 10-year-olds' ($N=960$) body satisfaction were evaluated. Boys and girls who experienced that they had been socially excluded from their peer group were more dissatisfied with their appearance. Bullied girls also attributed more negative evaluations of their appearance to other people. In **Study II**, peer victimization experiences were evaluated in relation to participants' ($N=960$) body composition (i.e., weight and height). Results indicated that whereas overweight boys mainly reported having been frequently subjected to appearance related teasing, overweight girls reported that not only were they subject to frequent appearance related teasing but also to frequent bullying. In **Study III**, the twofold objective was to examine the developmental trajectories of adolescent's body satisfaction, as well as the long-term associations between body satisfaction and peer victimization. Between age 10 and 13, both girls and boys ($N=874$) became significantly more dissatisfied with their appearance. The long-term effects of peer victimization experiences on participants' body satisfaction varied by gender: A higher frequency of peer victimization prospectively predicted girls' more negative weight-evaluations. For boys, frequent appearance related teasing predicted more negative beliefs about how other people view their appearance. **Study IV** used a qualitative design, aiming at providing an in-depth approach to the "continuum" of body dissatisfaction. Thirty 14-year-olds, who had reported stability in terms of a low level of body satisfaction at age 10 and 13, were interviewed. The qualitative analysis (based on an IPA-approach) resulted in four subgroups of participants. These subgroups were labeled Severely Troubled, Non-critical, Reflective, and Naïve. Participants' body satisfaction concerns appeared to interplay with subjective standpoints and perceptions of sociocultural influences on body dissatisfaction. Importantly, the most dissatisfied participants (Severely Troubled) reported a history of peer victimization experiences, along with having received very critical appearance commentary from their parents. To summarize, this dissertation demonstrates that young adolescents who repeatedly experience their peer interactions as problematic also seem to battle unfavorable attitudes and beliefs about their appearance.

Keywords: Body Satisfaction; Social Relations; Peer Victimization; Early Adolescence

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