Social Comparison Theory and Body Image: The Consequences of Cultural Influence

By

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Social Comparison Theory

- Developed by Leo Festinger in the 1950's
- Derived through a compellation of experiments, historical evidence and philosophical thought.
- Based on the idea that humans have a drive to evaluate their own ideas, opinions and abilities by comparing themselves with others.

Social Comparison Theory

- Festinger was the first to coin the term "social comparison" however, the general concepts can be traced back to Aristotle and Plato.

- Aristotle studied comparisons between people.

- Plato spoke of self-understanding and absolute standards.

Social Comparison Theory

- People see images portrayed by others as realistic and attainable.

- We compare ourselves to people or groups of people we perceive to be similar.

- The more dissimilar the less the need to compare ourselves.

Social Comparison Theory

- Festinger theorized that humans had an upward drive to achieve greater abilities

- To cease compsrison would cause hostility and the deprecation of opinions.

- Enduring truth: humans provide each other with important standards for self-evaluation.

Social Comparison Theory

- Recent studies suggest that the goals of social comparison are deeper than just basic self-evaluation; self-improvement and self-enhancement also play important roles.

- The two components of social comparison:
  - Upward comparison
  - Downward comparison

Downward Comparison

- Comparing oneself with someone perceived as "inferior" or "less fortune"
- Influenced by negative mood states
- Considered a defensive tendency
- People with high self-esteem compare downward more often than people with low self-esteem (ie: bullies)

Upward Comparison

- Compare themselves with others who are deemed "socially better."
- Typically leads to negative self-evaluation
- People want to believe they are one of the elite by finding similarities between themselves and this comparison group.

Upward Comparison

- Positive benefits:
- Perceive position of authority as equal or attainable
- When a superior provides inspiration
- Potential to increase accurate self-understanding
- Greater chance of positive change

Social Comparison an Women

- Women compare themselves intentionally and unintentionally everyday.
- Her opinion to that of a newspaper article
- Her academic ability to that of a classmate
- Her fitness or appearance to those around her

Media Influence

- Media sources affect women's body dissatisfaction via social comparison.
- Using this tendency create an ideal that women will want to attain.
- Fashion
- Skin care and make-up
- Body ideals: thin attractiveness

Media Influence

- Normative influence: peer pressure; women want to maintain equality within their comparison group.

- Media sources project images and ideals not realistic or attainable.

- Women's dissatisfaction with body image r/t media's portrayal of unrealistic ideal of thin attractiveness.

Media Influence

- Western ideals of slimness/beauty cause prevalence of anorexia nervosa
- DSM-III-R based on western cultural ideas of body shape and fat-phobia
- Globalization of western images and ideals of body image affect all cultures of women.

Our Cultural Influences

- Television shows: "A Makeover Story," "Extreme Makeover," "What Not to Wear"

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TLC

Our Cultural Influences

- Barbie:
- perfect physical ideal
- Top of every profession
- Has perfect mate
- All unattainable and unrealistic

Our Cultural Influences

- Global Barbie: her influence on other cultures
- Nigerian Agbogho-mmuo mask

Our Cultural Influences

Health Issues

- These unattainable societal expectations have far reaching consequences to women's health:
- Physical: hair dyeing, skin lightening/tightening, and plastic surgery
- Psychological: depression, anxiety, anorexia and bulemia
- Permanent physical mutilation ie: foot binding or plastic surgery complications.

Health Issues

Future Research

- Media generates anxiety about non-weight related body parts further research should focus on assessing these aspects as well.

- Development of culturally sensitive tools/diagnostic criteria.

- Use of social comparison in the prevention of body dissatisfaction.