

No(body) is Perfect

Review of Research

In Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive's experiment, titled "Does Barbie Make Girls Want to Be Thin? The Effect of Experimental Exposure to Images of Dolls on the Body Image of 5- to 8-Year-Old Girls," the broad issue of body image is addressed. Body image is important to the field of human development because either intense focus on or apathy towards body image can lead to several extremes. These extremes include anorexia-nervosa, bulimia-nervosa, and obesity. With nearly 25% of people below average body weight and 20% over average body weight, perceptions of body image pose a serious threat.

The research questions for the study were as follows: Do images of Barbie negatively affect girls' body image? Does exposure to images of a more realistic doll have the same effects? Is the impact of exposure to Barbie images age related? To determine the psychological impact of Barbie on the girls' body image and self-esteem, the researchers conducted a study in which three different groups were exposed to different images. One group was presented with Barbie doll (U.S. size 2) images; a second group was presented with Emme doll (U.S. size 16) images, and a third group was not presented with any dolls; this group was presented with neutral images. Participants for these groups comprised 162 girls from six primary schools in the East Sussex county of Southern England, ranging from the ages of 5 to 8. The authors predicted that younger girls (up to the age of 7) exposed to Barbie images would report greater body dissatisfaction, whereas the older girls would not really be affected by Barbie. Also, the authors predicted that exposure to the Emme doll images and no dolls at all would have no effect on a desire to be thinner.

The experiment was conducted during normal school hours at the six schools. Girls were put into groups of three for the experiment, and each session lasted roughly fifteen minutes. In each of the experimental groups, the girls were exposed to six images through a picture book while a story (related to the pictures) was read to them, and then body esteem was measured. In order to assess body dissatisfaction, each participant filled out a questionnaire known as the Revised Body Esteem Scale (R-BES). Nine questions were asked from the R-BES in order to keep it short. Since many of the girls were very young, answers were determined by choosing from three pictures of smiley faces. The Child Figure Rating Scale was also used; with the scale, the children were asked to choose the figure that best reflected their actual body size, ideal body size, and future adult ideal body size by coloring in the image that best represented the body size that was addressed. Based on their responses, body dissatisfaction was scored by subtracting the girls' ideal body size from her actual body size.

Based on the results, it was found that body shape was very similar when they are asked about both the present moment and ideal body shape as an adult. In addition, older girls reported more pronounced differences between their actual and ideal body size, therefore highlighting the fact that the older girls desired a thinner body. As expected, those who were exposed to the Barbie doll images had considerably higher rates of body dissatisfaction. High rates of body dissatisfaction affected the girls aged 5.5 to 7.5 (more pronounced for those aged 6.5 to 7.5) but not those aged 7.5 to 8.5. For those who were exposed to Emme doll and neutral images, a difference was not found in body dissatisfaction between the two.

For those aged 5.5 to 6.5, differences between actual and ideal adult body size were not noteworthy; however, for girls aged 6.5 to 7.5, those exposed to Barbie did report significant differences between actual and ideal adult body size. Girls aged 7.5 to 8.5 proved to have one

significant finding; when exposed to the Emme doll, they reported increased differences between actual and ideal adult body size, desiring more extreme thinness as an adult.

From these results, the researchers were able to conclude that for impressionable young girls, Barbie poses a negative ideal of body image. Internalizing a negative body image at a young age (when self-concept is being developed) can pose serious risks for several problems later in life, such as depression, dieting, and possibly eating disorders. The fact that girls aged 7.5 to 8.5 were not affected by Barbie could be explained by the idea that by that age, girls' desires to be thinner have become an internalized standard, less influenced by the environment; also, these older girls may be looking more to TV and magazine sources for body image ideals rather than dolls. According to the researchers, the older girls' response to Emme doll images in regard to their ideal adult body image could be explained by the fact that seeing the fuller body of Emme caused fear in the girls for their future selves.

From these results and conclusions, the researches suggests the need for a decrease in the circulation of Barbie dolls, accompanied by an increase in circulation of Emme dolls, so as to portray a healthier body image to young girls. In addition, the researchers believe that educational programs about health and body image would be very beneficial for these young girls. By implementing such programs before adolescence, the girls will have a higher self-esteem and stronger self-concept at a younger age.

Proposed Study

The following research question will be addressed in the proposed study: How do portrayals of eating disorders (images of those with anorexia-nervosa and obesity) affect adolescents' body esteem and the difference between actual size and ideal size? This question is

important because perception of body image (especially during such a critical time as adolescence) is negatively correlated with many factors, including depression, social isolation, and eating disorders.

Participants for the study will be adolescent females ranging from the ages of 12 to 18. A total of 150 participants will be recruited from several middle and high schools within the central Alabama region. In order to conduct the research, images of one anorexic and one obese person participating in daily activities, as well as neutral images of things associated with daily activities, will need to be obtained. These pictures will be presented in a book format like the aforementioned research study. In addition, two personal stories (one from a person struggling with each type of eating disorder) will need to be obtained and transcribed in order to be read to the participants.

Initially, participants will take the original R-BES, with a length of 24 questions. Then, each participant will fill out the adult version of the Figure Rating Scale. After completing these questionnaires for the first time, the adolescents will then wait a month until participation in the actual experiment.

After a month has passed, participants will randomly be divided into three experimental groups, with 50 participants in each group: anorexia-nervosa images, obesity images, and neutral images. In order to randomly divide the girls, they will draw a number (1, 2, or 3) from a box of papers with the numbers equally written on them. Group 1 will be presented with the anorexia-nervosa images. Group 2 will be shown the obesity images, and group 3 will be exposed to the neutral images. For both the anorexia-nervosa group and the obesity group, the female adolescents will be read a personal story written by someone struggling with the disorder and describing its impact on their daily life. The pictures in the books will mirror the subject of the

story. The neutral images will be accompanied by a similar story of daily activities, but no disorders or abnormalities in daily living will be mentioned.

After completion of the experiment, the adolescents will take part in a post evaluation, using the same questionnaires as before, in order to reassess body esteem and the difference between actual size and ideal size. By completing the R-BES and Figure Rating Scale both before and after the experiment, it will be easier to note whether or not body dissatisfaction was affected by the stories and images or if the adolescents already had preconceived ideas about their bodies.

The following hypotheses are dependent upon obtaining significant findings, as defined by there actually being a difference in responses to the questionnaires pre- and post-experiment. To support this, this requirement is necessary because if there is not a difference between the two responses, it is likely that the images were not effective and that ideas of body image must be attributed to another factor. For those exposed to anorexia-nervosa images, I hypothesize that body esteem will not be affected but that actual and ideal body size will. The adolescents will perceive their actual body size as heavier than it is and choose an ideal body size that is unrealistic and unhealthy. Moreover, for those exposed to obesity images, I hypothesize that body esteem will be higher after having seen the images. In addition, these adolescents will perceive their actual body size as it truly is and rate the ideal body size as very close to their actual body size. For those exposed to neutral images, I hypothesize that body esteem and actual size will not be impacted but that ideal body size will be desired at an ideal slightly below actual body size. In conclusion, I believe the results from this proposed research study will prove to be significant and very beneficial in terms of preventing future adolescents from believing in negative body image.