Three Essays on Adolescent Social Networks, Body Culture, and Dieting

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Abstract

KIMBERLY R. MANTURUK: Three Essays on Adolescent Social Networks, Body Culture, and Dieting
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This dissertation focuses on the social causes and consequences of dieting, an outcome that has been under-theorized in contemporary research. I present three papers examining the complex relationship between dieting, friendship networks, and cultural body ideals. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data, I argue that dieting is a gendered symbolic behavior associated with peer group status and social network embeddedness.

The first chapter presents a qualitative analysis of adolescent male body image. I examine how young men perceive, interpret, and are affected by mainstream cultural messages about appearance. While some boys do feel pressured to strive for muscularity, and experience social and self-esteem consequences when they fail to achieve it, there is more diversity among how men interpret body ideals and are affected by them than among women. This project elucidates how cultural male body ideals manifest in the lives of adolescent boys and illustrates the strategies young people use to interpret and evaluate complex cultural messages.

In the second chapter, I present a theoretical framework that conceptualizes dieting as a potential pathway to status and peer esteem for young women. I conclude that dieting is less likely when girls have alternative pathways to status which also provide them with an alternative to popular culture’s emphasis on the thin ideal. One such pathway is participation in sports, which provides peer esteem and an idea that emphasizes fitness and
performance. This demonstrates that, while adolescent girls are clearly influenced by body ideals, alternative ideologies may translate into observable reductions in dieting.

In the third chapter, I study the extent to which adolescents’ opinions about their weight and weight-related behaviors are related to how their social network embeddedness. I find that friendship network size matters and not the weight beliefs of those in one's network. Boys who have more weak ties in their networks are less likely to diet, while a girl's risk of dieting decreases as the number of strong ties in her network increases. This suggests perhaps a reverse causality process. Adolescents who identify as overweight may do so because they have smaller social networks.
To Michael, Tristan, and Elizabeth

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and the larger theoretical paradigms to which it speaks. It is no exaggeration to say that every article I have written in graduate school has benefited from his intelligent and considerate feedback.

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relevance in the lives of real people.

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INTRODUCTION

How important is dieting in the lives of American teenagers? Who diets, and for what purpose? These two deceptively simple questions are the basis for my dissertation, and my research suggests that the answers are far more complex than past scholarship suggests. I argue that dieting is about more than a desire to control the body; it is a symbolic action with social meanings rooted in cultural ideals pertaining to definitions of femininity and masculinity, social status, and peer group acceptance. Understanding what it means to diet requires an understanding of what it means to be female, and how such meaning is expressed through body-management actions. It also requires us to distinguish dieting from thinness, for body weight alone is an imperfect predictor of whether someone chooses to diet. My research seeks to determine the social contexts and social network structures that promote and inhibit dieting among adolescents, as well as present an in-depth analysis of how cultural body ideals affect the lived experiences of young people.

Research Objectives

In this dissertation, I present three articles which conceptualize dieting and related body-management actions as behaviors which have their own social meaning, rather than being solely manifestations of a desire to change the body. Not all young people who diet believe they are overweight; many teenage dieters are not even dissatisfied with their weight. I argue that the act of dieting, particularly among adolescents, is a gendered public behavior which is aimed as much at signifying acceptance of cultural gender norms as at producing a change in one's physical body. To substantiate this claim, I examine: 1) what cultural body
norms and ideals are among adolescents, 2) whether dieting is related to social status and peer esteem, and 3) the degree to which social network embeddedness affects how young people classify their weight and whether they diet.

This project contributes to research in an area that has long suffered from a divide between theory and analysis. Feminist scholars have offered strong theoretical descriptions of, and explanations for, gendered norms of the body in modern society but have offered relatively few rigorous studies of how and when these norms affect individual behavior choices. Dieting has been seen as a product of modern culture's emphasis on female thinness. Susan Bordo describes it as, “the logical (if extreme) manifestations of anxieties and fantasies fostered by our culture” (Bordo 1993:15). While I do not disagree with this assessment, it offers no explanation for why some women choose to diet while others do not.

Conversely, health professionals and sociologists have leaned towards research focused on the demographic patterning of body weight and the social psychological outcomes correlated with weight. From these studies, we know which women are dieting but not why they are doing it. My research bridges these two traditions by offering a theoretical framework, grounded in social psychology and feminist theory, for understanding why some young people choose to take actions aimed at controlling their body weight and how those choices are constrained or encouraged through social interactions. In doing so, I offer three significant contributions which advance sociological research on culture and the body. First, I present a theoretically-informed qualitative analysis of male body norms and evaluate how they differ from widely-accepted female body norms. Second, I focus on the social meaning of dieting which has often been overlooked or conflated with body satisfaction in previous research. Third, I situate dieting and body weight classification within adolescent social
networks in order to consider not only how young people categorize and control their bodies but what social functions these choices serve.

**Why Study Dieting?**

Harking back to Durkheim and Mauss, body size classifications are inherently social in nature; society is the source of how we think about and categorize bodies. Through interactions with others, we learn what “overweight”, “black”, and “disabled” bodies look like. Within American culture, there is a plurality of definitions for what is and is not an overweight body, yet very little disagreement among young women that thin is good and thinner is better. For many women, there is more than a small grain of truth to the expression, “you can never be too thin”.

This near-universal acceptance of the thin ideal for women has been documented in many studies to-date. A 2007 study by researchers at Cornell University found that 90% of college women said they would like to weigh less, and half of the women they surveyed who were medically underweight said they either wanted to maintain their weight or weigh less (Neighbors and Sobal 2007). Focus group studies of teenage girls in 2000 found that the desire to weigh less was near-universal, even among girls who were not dissatisfied with their weight (Tiggemann, Gardiner, and Slater 2000).

Given the widespread acceptance of the thin body ideal for women, it is not surprising that dieting is also common. While the evidence is unclear on the question of whether dieting produces long-term weight loss among overweight adults, several studies have documented the health risks and possible complications associated with dieting during adolescence. Some of the recent findings on adolescent dieting include:
• Most adolescent girls who diet fall within a normal BMI range (Patton et al. 2006)
• Dieters are at higher risk for impaired growth, delayed puberty, and declines in neurotransmitter functioning (Hill 1993)
• Over time, dieters report decreased self-efficacy and perform worse on cognitive tasks (Cooper and Fairburn 1992; Warren and Cooper 1988).
• Women who begin dieting before age eighteen have a higher risk of developing disordered eating patterns throughout their lifespan, particularly binge-eating which often causes overweight and obesity (Stice, Presnell, and Spangler 2002)

Given this evidence, it is clear that adolescent dieting is a risky behavior with potential long-term consequences. Yet dieting is unique because, in spite of the well-documented risks, it is socially accepted as a normal behavior. Few parents would encourage their pre-teen daughters to try smoking or drinking alcohol, but parents often encourage girls to diet as they approach adolescence (Edmunds and Hill 1999), and talking about dieting in a positive light is almost universal among teenage friendship groups (Nichter 2000). The widespread social acceptance dieting combined with the overwhelming evidence documenting its risks and dangers make this an important topic for research. Understanding the social contexts which increase or decrease an adolescent’s likelihood of dieting can have important implications for both public health researchers and health policy makers.

Male Body Image

What does an “attractive” man look like? Is it important for a young man to be attractive? And if so, why? A logical starting point for exploring the topic of dieting is to consider cultural body norms and ideals. Dieting is a social behavior because the body is a
normative social symbol. While there is a long tradition of research examining women and the body, little attention has been paid to the question of whether men feel similar pressure to strive for a particular appearance. Nor is it clear whether behavioral manifestations of body ideals such as dieting hold the same symbolic meaning for boys as for girls. What should a young man look like, and what (if anything) do contemporary adolescent boys do in order to achieve that appearance?

A handful of recent studies have suggested that male body ideals are becoming increasingly unrealistic with an emphasis on lean masculinity (Bordo 1999; Harrison, Phillips, and Olivardia 2000; Luciano 2002). Images of muscular men are more prevalent in the mainstream media than they were twenty years ago, and perhaps most significantly, such images are increasingly aimed at a male rather than female audience (Harrison, Phillips, and Olivardia 2000). However, it is not clear how young men interpret these cultural messages; do they see a muscular physique as an attainable objective or a Hollywood fantasy? Are there alternatives to the muscular ideal? Are adolescent boys affected by the ideal of a muscular body in the same way girls are affected by the thin ideal?

My research starts by demonstrating, rather than assuming, that there are cultural body ideals to which young men feel pressured to conform, yet these ideals are different than those perceived by most women. I also examine gender differences in perceptions of being overweight, factors which influence dieting, and the how body ideals affect routine behavior choices.

Male body image is about more than valuing a particular appearance more or less than some alternative. A young man's physical appearance, and the actions he takes to manage it, symbolically communicate something about his social identity. Joan Jacobs Brumburg (1998) discusses the various “body projects” that young women, but not men,
have undertaken to control their appearance over the past century: corseting their waists, shaving their underarm hair, dieting to become thin, and removing acne from their faces. Being female meant controlling the body; being male did not.

However, this is an incomplete picture of how body ideals affect the behaviors of young men and women. Men are not exempt from body projects, their projects simply look very different from those of young women. The ideal female body is thin and soft, and it communicates submission or at least passivity. I argue that male body ideals are as pervasive and culturally ingrained as female ideals, but they look very different because they communicate something different. The male body should communicate power and control, strength and activity. Susan Bordo (1999:57) discussing actions taken to control appearance, writes that, “For neither girls nor boys is this just about 'looking good'. It's about developing a body that makes one feel safe, respected, in control.” My research begins by drawing on interviews with young men to find out how, and for whom, these cultural messages about masculinity and identity are interpreted and expressed on the body. What do they think a man should look like? How important is it to “look good”? We know that women diet, but what types of body projects do men undertake in order to manage their appearance?

Contributions of the Research

Because the subjects of body management and dieting cross several disciplines, previous research has been highly varied in both its objectives and theoretical orientations. Cultural sociologists, perhaps most notably Bourdieu (2002), have looked at how culture influences people's aesthetic preferences including those related to appearance. He claims that the body, particularly management of the body, is a marker of class. Upper-class people, particularly women, display class through the ways they manage and control their bodies. The body is a project worthy of time and resources because it is central to class
status. Gill, Henwood, and McLean (2005) elaborate that the body has become a way for people to make claims about identity and to demonstrate who they are within their social context.

The limitation of approaching questions of body image from this perspective is that it sees the body only as the object of the self. The body is an object that people manipulate and present, but there is no sense of reflexivity or subjectivity. People may strive for a particular body weight in order to make a statement about their class position or identity, but we are left without answers to the question of how these activities actually affect them or why certain aesthetics are valued more than others. Dieting tells others something about who we are, but this relationship is not one directional. Who we are and how we fit in with those around us also influences how and when we diet. Following Susan Bordo, I argue that the body is more than simply a tool or prop that people use to express identity; it is a piece of one’s identity.

Bordo (1993) explores how the body, specifically the female body, is both object and subject. She describes how Western culture sees the body as something that is both “me” and also “with me”. The body, Bordo argues, is something that we cannot escape and yet something we cannot fully control. Control of the body, specifically control of physical appearance, is a way for the mind (“me”) to triumph over the body and transcend the material (the “with me”).

And yet the body is not just a thing to be controlled by the self, it is an object for social control as well. Foucault (1995) described how “docile bodies” are created through technologies that control and regulate what bodies do and where. Because the body is both object and subject, controlling the body object becomes a way to control the body/self subject. Bordo emphasizes that it is not just appearance but female appearance that is the
most heavily regulated and controlled in contemporary society. Any understanding of the relationship between appearance and identity needs to incorporate the recognition that cultural body ideals are gendered – there are very different ideals for men than for women.

In addition to bridging cultural studies and feminist theory, my work also incorporates several traditions within social psychology. Unlike theorists who have focused mainly on cultural messages about physical appearance, social psychologists have looked at how ideas, beliefs, and behaviors relating to the body are influenced by the social environment. Within social psychology, symbolic interactionists and social structure and personality researchers have done most of the research on body image.

Social structure and personality researchers taken as their starting point the finding from cultural sociology that differences in body-related actions are associated with social class differences. However, these researchers generally avoid cultural explanations for these differences. Rather, they explain how individual differences are caused by persistent behavior patterns that emerge from social structures. Their analyses generally include variables for sociodemographic characteristics such as race, gender, occupation, or education which are taken to be proxy measures for social structures (Cockerham 2005; Demarest and Allen 2000).

Researchers have found, for example, that white adolescent women are more likely to diet than black adolescent women (Neff et al 1997), working-class people value thinness less than upper-class people (Chang 2003), and well-educated men and women spend a greater proportion of their income on their appearance than do their less well-educated peers (Averett and Korenman 1996). These are important lines of research, for we know that body image and access to resources to control the body (fitness centers, diet products, etc) generally replicate existing stratification patterns. While these explanations explain
differences across groups, they offer little to explain within-group variation. By emphasizing structural influences, researchers describe trends and tendencies but not differences or variations. My research incorporates measures of social structure – race, status pathways, and socioeconomic class – in recognition of the importance these structures play in shaping not only how individuals think about body ideals but also what body-management actions they have available to them. I combine this recognition of the importance of structural constraints with a symbolic interactionist framework which emphasizes the symbolic meaning of dieting and how it is influenced through peer interaction.

Symbolic interaction finds its roots in Mead's work on the relationship between the self and society. Mead (1967) claimed that the essence of the self was its reflexivity. People have the ability to take on the beliefs and attitudes of others, and therefore the self can be both and object and a subject. The self is not wholly individual, nor is it entirely a product of society. It is a product of the interaction between the two. As discussed previously, contemporary feminist theorists have incorporated this dualism in their conceptions of the body as both object and subject as well.

So if the self is this reflexive object-subject, what is the “society” that influences it?
In Mead's work, society takes the form of the generalized other. As the capacity for reflexivity develops through play, an awareness of the generalized other emerges. In order to play a game, such as baseball, a single player must know not only how to play their position but also the rules governing all the other positions on the field. The player must be able to mentally take the position of all others and figure out how they would respond to situations. When people engage in interactions, they consider not just the specific others with whom they are interacting but also the generalized other that represents the attitudes of society. Blumer (1986) summarized the three basic assumptions of symbolic interactionism as: 1)
people act towards others (objects, people, ideas) based on the meanings those others have, 2) those meanings are learned through interaction, and 3) meanings are managed and modified through interpretation.

From this premise, symbolic interactionists have looked at the relationship between appearance and identity and how appearance is communicated and displayed through interaction. Hesse-Biber and Nagy (2004) looked at the relationship between identity and attitudes about the body. They found that black adolescent women expressed and affirmed their racial identity by disavowing mainstream white standards of physical beauty and dieting behaviors. Other research has considered the relationship between media consumption and self-concept (Milkie 1999), whether perceptions of attractiveness are related to the presence of attractive others (Wade and Abetz 1997), and how identity influences perceptions of one's appearance (Furnham, Titman, and Sleeman 1994).

While these findings recognize the subjective nature of the self as it relates to physical appearance, they lack an understanding of the specific interactive contexts that influence how people perceive their physical appearance. In the Wade and Abetz (1997) article referenced above, for example, the authors find that people rate their own physical appearance higher when they are exposed to images of unattractive others. However, they fail to consider whether these perceptions exist only as a comparison to a specific other (I am more attractive than that person), or whether they actually change how they view their appearance after interacting with less attractive others (I am more attractive than most other people).

In summary, this dissertation bridges a gap between cultural studies, feminist theory, and social psychology to offer a comprehensive analysis of factors that promote and inhibit dieting among adolescents. I analyze which young people diet, under what social
circumstances are they more or less likely to diet, the role that social networks play in promoting dieting, and whether adolescent boys experience the same pressure to strive for unrealistic bodies as young women do. I argue that understanding why young people diet requires an understanding of: 1) what are cultural body ideals, 2) which adolescents express these ideals through action – dieting, and 3) how do social groupings and peer interactions influence a young person’s likelihood of dieting. By tracing and analyzing the attitudinal and behavioral manifestations of body culture from the individual to the collective, I present a unique, comprehensive examination of an all-too-common adolescent behavior.
REFERENCES


CHAPTER 1

“THEY MIGHT CALL ME UGLY BUT I CAN DANCE”: HOW ADOLESCENT BOYS INTERPRET AND REACT TO THE CULTURE OF MUSCULARITY

In recent years, scholars have increasingly pointed to mainstream America's adoption of the thin female ideal as contributing to, if not directly causing, rising rates of unhealthy dieting, body dissatisfaction, and eating disorders among women (Botta 1999; Harrison 2000; Haworth-Hoeppner 2000; Hesse-Biber 2007; Klaczynski, Goold, and Mudry 2004). The thin ideal is present in American culture as a collection of images, ideas, and messages idealizing thinness for women and associating non-thinness with being unattractive, lazy, and lacking self-control (Bordo 1993; Carr and Friedman 2005; Paquette and Raine 2004).

However, far less attention has been paid to whether there are comparable ideals relating to male body image and physical appearance, and what impact those ideals have on the everyday lives of young men. In this study, I examine whether adolescent boys perceive a cultural ideal for male appearance and how important it is in their lives. I explore how they relate to cultural messages about appearance, and evaluate the impact that these ideals have on their beliefs and actions.

Background

Many previous studies have examined how young people, especially women, are affected by the thin ideal (for examples, see Hesse-Biber 2007; Jones, Vigfusdottir, and Lee 2004; Stice and Whitenton 2002; Wolf 1991). Even elementary school-aged girls are exposed to frequent media images that promote thinness and denigrate being overweight
(Lamb and Brown 2006). For women, being thin is presented in American culture not just as desirable but imperative.

While men were long considered to be less affected by cultural body ideals, recent research has suggested that there is increased pressure on men to likewise conform to unrealistic and often unattainable body ideals. While women are surrounded by images idealizing thinness, men are confronted by images idealizing muscular bodies. From muscular action toys for young boys to popular movies such as “Rocky” and magazine advertisements featuring unusually muscular men, cultural images of male bodies are squarely focused on being lean (but not thin) and strong (Bordo 1999; Pope 2006). Scholars point to this “culture of masculinity” as exerting increasing pressure on men to control and shape their bodies through exercise in much the same way that women are pressured to strive for thinness through dieting (Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn 2004; Luciano 2002). However, it is not clear whether men internalize the culture of masculinity in the same way that many women internalize the culture of thinness.

During early adolescence, many girls become aware of the thin ideal and develop their ideas about how it relates to them (Lamb and Brown 2006). In doing this, they draw on a variety of resources including their self-identity, social supports, media exposure, and available alternative ideals. For example, studies have indicated that African-American young women are less likely to internalize the thin ideal because they are more likely to see media images of African-American women who deviate from the ideal (Frisby 2004; Lovejoy 2001). A recent longitudinal study of adolescent media consumption and related outcomes found that teenage girls who were exposed to more sexual content in the media (music, television, movies, and magazines) were significantly more likely to become sexually active at a younger age (Brown et al. 2006). In much the same way, young women who are
exposed to frequent images that reinforce the thin ideal, especially television and magazine
images, are more likely to internalize it and develop critical opinions about their weight
(Botta 1999; Field et al. 1999; Stice, Spangler, and Agras 2001).

While adolescent boys are exposed to images reinforcing the muscular ideal male
body, these images are not as pervasive as images of the thin ideal. It is possible that
adolescent boys relate to the culture of muscularity as an unrealistic ideal, while young girls
internalize thinness as an imperative – equally as unrealistic yet far more obligatory. My
research examines not only what adolescent boys see as ideal male appearance, but also the
strategies they use to confront and make sense of this ideal.

For many women, the thin ideal is an imperative that affects both their internal self-
concept and how they are viewed and treated by others. After viewing media images of thin
women, women report lower self-esteem and less satisfaction with their appearance
(Borzekowski and Bayer 2005). Women whose appearance deviates from the thin ideal are
less popular among their peers (Strauss and Pollack 2003) and more likely to consider
themselves to be unpopular (McCabe, Ricciardelli, and Finemore 2002). The thin ideal has
economic consequences as well. Women who are overweight experience discrimination in
the areas of employment, education, and health care (Carr and Friedman 2005). Within
professional occupations, women who are overweight are less likely to receive promotions or
career advancement opportunities (Haskins and Ransford 1999). Whether a woman
internalizes the thin ideal or not, it is a cultural standard that has real consequences in the
lives of most women. While cultural ideals of the male body may be unrealistic, do teenage
boys experience these types of social consequences or lower self-esteem if they fail to
approach the ideal, even if they personally reject the culture of muscularity?
There is some evidence to indicate that the importance of body image among men, and the self-esteem consequences of body dissatisfaction, is changing. Sarah Grogan (1998) writes that norms and expectations relating to the male body are shifting in Western culture. While a lean, muscular body has long been the ideal, media images emphasizing the importance of being muscular have increased significantly since the mid-1980's. In focus group studies, Grogan and England (2002) found that adolescent boys and young men have very specific and narrow definitions of an ideal male body - “just a bit muscular” - and negatively value virtually all other body types including being thin without muscles, being overweight, or being very muscular. The young men also associated moderate masculinity with feeling powerful, having a positive self-image, and being confident. While body size and shape have been associated with self-worth among women for a long time, this is a relatively new development among men.

My project focuses on how adolescent boys think and talk about body ideals and their own bodies. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, I argue that boys confront the emerging culture of muscularity with varying degrees of awareness, and that they interpret and assign meaning to the muscular ideal through their interactions and past experiences. By analyzing how young men approach and deal with cultural messages about the body, I aim to shed light on how adolescents' lives are affected not simply by cultural messages about weight and appearance, but by the individualized meanings and interpretations they assign to those messages. As Susan Bordo (1993) explains:

...images and ideology press for conformity to dominant cultural norms. But people's identities are not formed only through interaction with such images, powerful as they are. The unique configurations (of ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, religion, genetics, education, family, age, and so forth) that make up each person's life will determine how each actual woman is affected by our culture. [p. 62]
Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 122 adolescent boys, I analyze the strategies these young people use to confront body ideals and relate the cultural ideal of male musculality to their own experiences and identities. I specifically focus on how adolescents talk about body ideals and what they see as being an ideal male body. I also analyze the strategies boys use to reject or internalize body ideals, and how this affects both their behavior and self-concept.

Significance

This research offers a comprehensive qualitative analysis of cultural body ideals among young men, a topic that has been largely overlooked in sociological analyses of culture and the body. The topic of female body ideals and the culture of thinness has been extensively explored by both sociologists and feminist scholars (for examples, see Bordo 1993; Hesse-Biber 2007; Nichter 2000; Paquette and Raine 2004), but research on male body image has been more narrowly focused. Researchers have focused on analyses examining, for example, the impact that viewing images of muscular men has on male self-esteem (Lorenzen, Grieve, and Thomas 2004). “The Adonis Complex: The Secret Crisis of Male Body Obsession” (Phillips and Olivardia 2000) and Susan Bordo's “The Male Body” (1999) were heralded as the first in-depth analysis of cultural male body ideals in contemporary America. And yet while these studies provided a comprehensive and historical understanding of what male body ideals are, they did not explore how men themselves actually interpret these ideals or what affect the culture of musculality has on their everyday lives.

This study advances research on male body image by tracing body ideals from their cultural roots to their relevance in the lived experienced of adolescent boys. In doing so, this project brings together three important dimensions of the interaction between culture and
action: defining cultural ideals, examining how adolescents interpret these ideals, and understanding how young men translate (or do not translate) culture into action. By bringing these dimensions together, I present a detailed understanding of not only what cultural body ideals are to young men, but also how the abstract concept of the culture of masculinity is manifested in the routine of everyday life.

Understanding cultural male body ideals is also important because they have a real and profound effect on the lives of many young men. The teens who participated in this study shared stories of injuring themselves as a result of exercise, friends who used steroids to build muscle, and peers who dieting by drinking vinegar. For many participants, body ideals are not abstract concepts or impersonal images, but lived experiences that affected their behavior, self-concept, and peer interactions.

Data and Methods

I analyze interviews conducted as part of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), a longitudinal study designed to capture in-depth information about the role that religion plays in shaping the beliefs, opinions, values, and actions of adolescents and young adults. The NSYR has two components: a nationally-representative telephone survey and in-depth interviews with a sub-sample of survey participants. The project began in August, 2001 and is ongoing at this time. The first two waves of the NSYR, fielded in 2002 and 2005, were funded by the Lilly Endowment. For this study, I am analyzing only the interviews conducted with adolescent boys during the first wave. This is because confronting cultural messages and images about the body and physical appearance is uniquely salient during adolescence. It is not clear whether these findings could be extrapolated to adults; studies have found that body ideals remain fairly consistent across the lifespan for women but body satisfaction declines with age (Grogan 1998).
Data

During the first wave of NSYR data collection, 122 adolescent boys between the ages of 13 and 17 participated in a semi-structured in-person interview. Interview participants were selected from the pool of respondents who had participated in the telephone survey portion of the NSYR. Interview participants were selected on the basis of religion, race, gender, and geographic location in order to represent the demographic composition of the survey population. As shown in Table 1.1. The interviews were conducted by professors and graduate research assistants from several colleges and universities.

Table 1.1: Age and Race Distribution of Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>64.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The focus of the NSYR is religion, which is not the focus of this research. However, this data set is uniquely suited to my objectives because it includes information about how adolescents and young adults perceive their appearance and how they feel about the thin ideal. In both waves of the survey, participants were asked how happy they were with their physical appearance. Because the interviews are semi-structured, the interviewers were able
to explore this question in greater detail by following up with questions based on the themes that respondents mentioned. Most of the interviewers explored questions about why respondents felt they way they did about their appearance, whether they believed that appearance was important to other teens, and what role media images or peer influences played in how they saw themselves.

Method

I coded the interviews using TAMSAnalyzer, an open-source text analysis software program developed by Matthew Weinstein and publicly available at http://tamsys.sourceforge.net/. The TAMSAnalyzer program is designed to facilitate the analysis of textual themes in the social sciences using interview data or media documents. The primary advantage of this program is its simplicity. The program is designed to allow users to assign codes to text simply by selecting the relevant passage and clicking on the desired code name. Coded information can then be extracted for simple analysis.

While these are semi-structured interviews, the interviewers were given a script that included main prompts to guide the interview. I analyzed the portion of the interviews that started with the general question, “How happy or unhappy are you with your body and physical appearance?” Most respondents provided an answer to the initial question of whether they liked or disliked their appearance. The majority of respondents went on to discuss exactly how they viewed their body and overall physical appearance, what images they saw in the media relating to body image, and whether it was an issue for most people they knew.

The codes I use emerge throughout the coding process based on the patterns I observe, although I focus on three primary subjects. I evaluate what, if anything, the respondent feels is the ideal male appearance. I explore whether he has internalized or
accepted the culture of muscularity as being important to him. Finally, I determine whether or not cultural messages about body ideals have an impact on the respondent's beliefs or actions. My coding approach is as follows: first I read through all the interviews without coding anything to get a sense of the trends and patterns that are present. I also look for any statements about appearance, body image, or body satisfaction that appear in other portions of the interviews. I then read through a second time focusing on descriptions of messages and images people perceive relating to body ideals. I look for patterns or themes among these messages based on gender, race, or social class. Finally, I code the specific portions of the interviews that are examples of each theme or pattern. This research is qualitative in nature so the “codes” I present represent the range of themes and patterns represented in the data rather than a quantification of the frequency a particular theme was expressed.

**Types of Cultural Male Body Ideals**

I first analyzed what respondents perceived as being cultural body ideals for men. Out of 122 interviews, 10 did not contain enough information to code. This was generally because an interviewer either skipped the question or did not probe for sufficient information. Of the remaining 112 respondents, I found five themes that emerged as respondents talked about what are body ideals for young men. These themes are summarized in Table 1.2. The most common theme was aesthetic muscularity, the idea that men should look muscular. This was often articulated in conjunction with the second theme emphasizing athletic performance, although some respondents believed that only performance was important. A third theme was that body ideals center on acceptance from others, especially from girls. The young men who expressed this view generally felt that any appearance which was attractive to girls was acceptable. A fourth group of boys emphasized the importance of clothing or grooming rather than physique. Finally, some boys did not
feel that young men were pressured to conform to any particular body ideals. Most of these respondents felt that caring about one's appearance was something that only teenage girls did.

Table 1.2: Typology of Male Body Ideals Reported (N=112)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Body Ideal</th>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muscular</td>
<td>Muscular, big arms, lean (not skinny)</td>
<td>“You’ve got to be big...you've got to be lean.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic</td>
<td>Strong, lift weights, play sports</td>
<td>“I wish I was more, a little more athletic.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appealing to girls</td>
<td>Any appearance that girls like, appeal to women, go on dates</td>
<td>“I just want to be able to take my shirt off at the beach and still be able to pick up chicks.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-dressed</td>
<td>Name brand clothes, expensive shoes</td>
<td>“...not the physical. I think its more like the clothing.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>No male ideal, body image is women's issue</td>
<td>“...teen women have a problem with thinking they're fat.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Culture of Muscularity

An emphasis on aesthetic muscularity was most consistent theme that emerged during the interviews. Out of 112 boys, 80 felt that there is some type of aesthetic-based body ideals for men. While some boys only articulated the importance of “looking good”, most focused specifically on muscularity or weight, or both.

Whether they personally accepted or rejected it, most boys were aware of the cultural ideal of a muscular male body. For example, sixteen-year-old Phillip explained:

...what can I say? You've got to lift weights. You've got to be big. That's what everyone's pushing on you...You've got to be strong. You've got to be lean, you know?

Philip mentions both an aesthetic element (being lean, being big) and a functional element (lift weights, be strong) to male body ideals. This was a common sentiment echoed by many
respondents. Not only did they feel that men should look muscular, but men should also be able to demonstrate their muscularity through athletic performance. This dual emphasis is evident in fifteen-year-old Dennis’ description of what he is doing to become muscular:

Dennis: Running, exercising, taking my body to the max. In football, you got to take your body from the max, okay? You’re at the max now, you got to take it past that. You got to take it to where you can endure more pain and everything...
Interviewer: How much of an issue is this for other teens your age?
Dennis: Well, basically boys, we want, you know, males, we act dominant. We want to show who’s got the biggest muscles, you know, who’s the strongest. Basically, you know, we want to look the best we can.

At first, Dennis emphasizes performance as being his objective. He wants to be able to run faster and exercise longer. However, when asked why these goals are important, he focuses on the idea that these activities will help him achieve a muscular aesthetic. In particular, Dennis emphasizes the importance of looking muscular in comparison to his peers and his athletic activities are a way for him to achieve the muscular appearance that he feels all young men desire.

I find that weight does matter to some adolescent boys. However, the young men who were concerned about their weight tended to express it in a slightly different way than the “you can never be too thin” message expressed by many young women. These respondents expressed the idea that men should be “not overweight” but also “not skinny”. Thinness was only presented as being positive when it allowed a boy to be more muscular; the ideal aesthetic was muscularity and some degree of thinness was seen as being necessary so that others could see one's muscles. However, being thin without being muscular was viewed by most respondents as undesirable. For example, fifteen-year-old James evaluated his appearance by responding, “I could be, I could have a little more muscle. I’m rather skinny.” For James, thinness is a negative aesthetic because it is not accompanied by
muscula\textsuperscript{r}ity. Muscularity is the aesthetic ideal, and thinness is undesirable because it detracts from a muscular appearance. While James would like to weigh more in order to become more muscular, other respondents said that weighing too much was also undesirable because it also made one appear less muscular. Martin, an athletic-looking seventeen-year-old, explained why he was somewhat dissatisfied with his appearance:

\begin{quote}
Martin: You have to work out and stuff, so a little more, but then, I mean, no one thinks that they're perfect, I mean.
Interviewer: What would you change?
Martin: I've always liked to be skinnier, um, like, you know, stronger.
\end{quote}

While James would like to weigh more and Martin would like to weigh less, they are both aware of the same body ideal of muscularity. Rather than feeling pressured to be thin, as many teenage girls do, these boys felt felt pressured to avoid having a body weight that would make one appear non-muscular.

One point to note is that the abdomen or stomach came up repeatedly when boys mentioned the need to avoid excess weight in order for muscles to be visible. Several boys mentioned that they would like to have “six pack abs” or “lose the stomach”. Nelson, a fifteen-year-old, would like to be more muscular and sees a link between athleticism and having visible abdominal muscles. However, he has difficulty articulating this connection in spite of the fact that it clearly influences how he sees himself. Nelson tells the interviewer that he is dissatisfied with his appearance because he would like to be “healthier”:

\begin{quote}
Interviewer: Okay, what do you mean by healthier?
Nelson: Ah, do a lot more exercising and a lot more sports activities.
[Brief discussion of which sports Nelson plays]
Interviewer...is there anything you would change about your physical appearance if you could?
Nelson: Yea.
Interviewer: What's that?
Nelson: Ah, my, ah, stomach, I would say, yea.
\end{quote}

*Performance Ideals*

The second theme that emerged during the interviews was the importance of athletic performance for boys. This overlapped significantly with the first theme emphasizing musculature, as discussed above. However, some boys felt that only performance was important and they evaluated their physical appearance in terms of their athletic performance. Out of 112 respondents, 18 mentioned physical performance when asked how they felt about their appearance. Thomas, a fourteen-year-old boy, responded to a question about his physical appearance by discussing his athletic abilities. Throughout his interview, he never mentioned any aesthetic attribute when talking about his appearance and instead focused only on athletics:

Interviewer: ...how happy would you say you are, or unhappy, with your body or physical appearance? Thomas: Um, I guess I wish I was more, a little more athletic. I'm not short or anything, so I am basically happy. I just wish I was a little more athletic, and I'm not weak or anything. I can bench seventy-some pounds so I feel I can do pretty good. So I'm happy, I guess. Interviewer: How, like, how big of an issue is it for you, you know? Thomas: I've been happy this year. I made the football team. I am playing baseball right now. I wish I ran faster. I'm not that fast at running, but that's okay. I can hit the ball hard, far enough I don't need to. So, so, I'm basically, I'm pretty happy, I'd say.

In spite of the fact that the interviewer specifically asked Thomas how he felt about his appearance, he thought only about his athletic abilities when responding. It is possible that Thomas was aware of an aesthetic ideal, but that he looked to athletic performance as an indicator of musculature. Athletic performance is seen by some as a more quantifiable
indicator of muscularity than the subject notion of “looking muscular” or “being strong.”

Fourteen-year-old Mel, a high school wrestler, says that he is happy with his appearance because he pushes himself to perform well in wrestling. He says, “I feel like if I can do that, then there must not be anything wrong with me.”

*Attracting Girls*

The third theme that emerged as these adolescent boys talked about body ideals was the idea that the ideal male body was one that was attractive to women. This criterion was mentioned by nine boys. All respondents who perceived this ideal brought up the connection between appearance and dating in conjunction with other body ideals such as muscularity or performance. The key distinction was that these boys saw the ideal as entirely referential rather than being a fixed standard. For example, seventeen-year-old Chaz does perceive an emphasis on muscularity for young men, but only to the extent that it is appealing to young women. After initially saying that he would like to lose weight and become more muscular, Chaz elaborates:

> No, I mean, I don't need big muscles or anything. But if I, I mean, it would be, I don't want to be getting, get big and muscle. I just want to be able to take my shirt off at the beach and still be able to pick up chicks. That's all. That's all I want. Trust me [laughs], I don't want...that's all!

While Chaz does want to be muscular, his real standard for appearance is whether he is attractive to girls. He is willing to accept muscularity as an ideal if it results in his being evaluated favorable by women, but he does not see muscularity as an independent ideal.

Other teens did not express any particular attribute that they felt was important to girls, but simply said that there was pressure on adolescent boys to be attractive to others. One fourteen-year-old, when asked what specifically made him happy about his appearance, responded, “I get a lot of attention from girls.”
Clothes Make the Man

The fourth and final body ideal that some young men perceived was that adolescent men should dress fashionably or wear expensive clothes. A total of 21 teens mentioned this during their interviews, ten of whom only mentioned fashion as being important and did not touch on any of the other three body ideals. Seventeen-year-old Ricardo explained that, “...its more like, not the physical. I think its more like the clothing. Clothing is very important here.”

Not only do these teens feel that body ideals center on fashion, they also feel that there is social pressure on adolescents to conform to popular fashion trends. Several of the boys felt somewhat conflicted about this. On one hand, they saw worrying about clothing as superficial or feminine. At the same time, they recognized that their peers did pay attention to their clothing. When asked whether he is happy with his appearance, seventeen-year-old Tyler says:

Um, I'm really happy. I'm blessed with the way, I don't know. I don't want to say. I, honestly, I wouldn't care, but, um, I don't know. I think teenagers stress a lot about what they look like, definitely. And name brand clothing, and music, they're definitely in to that. And somehow the clothes that you wear make you, for lack of a better word, hotter, you know? And I'm not saying that I don't do that cause I'm totally in to that.

Tyler is clearly ambivalent about what he sees as significant pressure on teens to dress a particular way. He wants to not care about clothing, but concedes that he and most other teens do.

While some boys who focus on clothing as a body ideal do so from the perspective of peer acceptance, others see clothing as a marker of group identity. Because one's clothing style can be controlled and changed more easily than one's weight or athletic performance, it
is a more malleable indicator of identity. Sixteen-year-old Marco explains why appearance is “a pretty big issue” for him and for others his age:

Marco: Because kids usually, they break off in to groups on how they dress. Just the way it happens, by the way you act, the way you look.
Interviewer: So do you think that physical appearance has something to do with who, like, who you'll be accepted by, or?
Marco: Yea.
Interviewer: In what ways?
Marco: I don't know, usually if you dress like grungy then you're usually accepted by them and not by the people who dress preppy. So it's just, I don't know.

Throughout his interview, Marco never mentions wanting to be muscular or slender, perform well at sports, or being attractive to women. He does report that he sometimes spends a lot of time thinking about how he dresses, and that he feels happier when he thinks that he looks well-dressed. Clearly clothing is important to Marco, but in a different way than muscularity is important to most of the respondents. Muscularity, athletic performance, and being attractive to women accord individual distinction. Dressing a particular way, however, establishes group identity and blurs individual distinction.

*It's a Girl Thing*

The last group of teens comprised those who were unaware of any cultural ideals of the male body. These fourteen boys either felt that appearance was generally not important to anyone, or it was important only to girls. A total of six boys were unaware of any body ideals for anyone and felt that body image was simply not something that mattered, either to them or to anyone they knew. Reginald, a seventeen-year-old, was asked whether physical appearance was important and responded:

Reginald: It doesn't bother me at all
Interviewer: How much of an issue is this for other kids your age?
Reginald: I don't really think anyone has a problem with it that I hang out with.
Some of the boys who said that physical appearance was not an issue for them did say that
physical appearance was important to teenage girls. These respondents often articulated a
contrast between girls, who were concerned with their appearance, and boys who were
concerned with something else. These teens were generally aware of female body ideals, but
did not perceive any comparable ideal for men. Simon, a sixteen-year-old, explained that
appearance was nothing something that he thought about at all. When asked whether other
kids his age thought about it, he replied:

It's a, it's a big, it's a big problem with them cause they always have, um, ah, for
teenage girls mostly, um, cause they always like, 'Oh, I gotta look pretty. I gotta look
pretty.' They all, they always worried about looking pretty. They're like, for most of
the time guys, it ain't, it ain't really about how you look. It's how you act.

Simon not only identifies body image as being an exclusively female concern, he implies that
it is a somewhat superficial concern as compared to men who value action over appearance.
Not being concerned about appearance is a way to express a masculine identity and separate
one's self from the feminine.

It is notable that Simon mimicked what he saw as typical “girl talk” when asked
about body image. Several young men honed in on fat talk as a specifically female activity,
and pointed to men's lack of fat talk as evidence of their more rational orientation towards
the body. Seventeen-year-old Harold explained that he was not concerned about appearance
at all, but his girlfriend was:

Interviewer: Okay, do you think it's a big deal for a lot of people your age, or?
Simon: I'd have to say teenage girls mostly, cause my girlfriend weighs about 130
pounds and she says she's fat and looks like a cow, so basically teen women have a
problem with thinking they're fat like that. And then you basically have to be like, go
and stand on that thing and if it says you weigh between 125 and 130 then you're not
fat.
Simon sees weight as being an issue for women, but not for men. He initially presents it as a somewhat irrational concern by characterizing his girlfriend as being slender but saying she “looks like a cow”. He then goes on to identify a very narrow weight range, 125 to 130 pounds, which qualifies a woman as being “not fat”. Both Simon and his girlfriend are aware of, and accept, the thin ideal for woman although Simon suggests that he views it rationally while his girlfriend does not.

**Interpreting Body Ideals**

The young men in this study see body ideals as being relevant (or irrelevant) in several different ways. The second stage of my analysis considers how adolescent boys interpret or relate to the culture of muscularity. Seven of the boys interviewed did not say anything on this topic or were not asked any relevant questions. Among the remaining 115 respondents, I find four distinct strategies for interpreting body ideals and determining their relevance. These are summarized in Table 1.3. First, some boys are simply disconnected from the culture of muscularity entirely. These are primarily the teens that were unaware of any male body ideals. Second, some teens have a conflicted interpretation of body ideals. They recognize that there is an ideal, and it is important to them, but they are uncomfortable or unhappy about that. They want to reject cultural body ideals, but feel powerless to do so. Third, some boys internalize and accept body ideals as being important, and they see this as normal for all teenagers. These young men may be happy or unhappy with their own appearance depending on how close they are to achieving an ideal appearance, but they do not question the norm of valuing physical appearance. Finally, a few boys actively and consciously reject body ideals. Some articulate specific reasons why they choose not to
accept body image as important, while others only recognize that others seem to care much more than they do.

Table 1.3: Interpretations of Male Body Ideals (N=115)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpretation</th>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disconnected</td>
<td>Unaware of body ideals, not relevant</td>
<td>“I don’t really think anyone has a problem with it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicted</td>
<td>Value body ideals but dislike them</td>
<td>“It's a big issue for some reason...people are shallow and superficial.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalized</td>
<td>Value body ideals, accept as normal</td>
<td>“…just about everybody would wish they were better looking”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejected</td>
<td>Consciously reject body ideals</td>
<td>“They make fun of me...they can say I'm ugly, but I can dance.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Disconnected: No One Really Cares

The first interpretation of body ideals is that they are not important either to the respondent or to teenage boys in general. Twelve respondents felt this way. Boys who expressed this view tended to look to their immediate circle of friends as a frame of reference. If physical appearance wasn't important wasn't important to people they knew, then these boys inferred that it was not important to anyone. Nathan, a seventeen-year-old, didn't see physical appearance as being a relevant issue for adolescents:

Interviewer: In general, how happy or unhappy are you with your body and physical appearance?
Nathan: Why? What about it?
Interviewer: What would you change if you could?
Nathan: Nothing
Interviewer: Okay, so how much of an issue is physical appearance for you?
Nathan: It doesn't bother me at all.
Interviewer: How much of an issue is this for other kids your age?
Nathan: I don't really think anyone has a problem with it that I hang out with.

For Nathan, body image and cultural ideals of appearance are simply not things that the average teenage boy thinks about. This is different from the teens who said that appearance
was not important to them because they were already muscular or strong. The boys who
were disconnected from cultural body ideals were usually aware when their own appearance
did not conform to such ideals, but they believed that physical appearance and cultural ideals
were not important to anyone. They implied that they would feel the same way no matter
how they looked, as compared to boys who would start to worry about their appearance if
they gained weight or otherwise fell short of how they wanted to look.

Among those who did not think body image was a relevant issue in the lives of
teenagers, most were the same respondents who only perceived cultural body ideals for
woman. They were aware of a culture of thinness and saw that it affected woman, but were
not aware of a counterpart for men. Like Nathan, fifteen-year-old Mel thinks that physical
appearance is not important to anyone because it is not important to him or his friends. He
does see it as mattering to girls, and draws a gender distinction between those who care how
they look and those who don't:

Interviewer: Um, how big of an issue is physical appearance for you or for your
peers?
Mel: None for my friends. I know girls, they are.

This theme of physical appearance as a gendered issue was also present in some of
the statements made by boys who did care about their appearance. Several
respondents stipulated that while they did care about appearance and they did try to
look muscular, they were less concerned than girls were. A common sentiment
among adolescent boys is that they care about their appearance in a “normal” way
while teenage girls care in an unhealthy or irrational manner.

*Conflicted: It's Sad But True*
The second way adolescent boys interpret body ideals is conflicted with reluctant acceptance. A total of 26 young men were conflicted in how they felt about male body ideals. These young men believe that physical appearance matters and there are social consequences to deviating significantly from cultural ideals, but they have not internalized and accepted the value of these ideals. They are, essentially, playing the game and disliking the rules. They often express disappointment and displeasure with the fact that physical appearance influences social interactions. Seventeen-year-old Bobby acknowledges that he has thought a lot about his appearance and used to want to change how he looked. He explains why:

Yea, I mean, its sad to say but the word on dating is, you know, the thing is based on looks. You know, and there's nothing you're gonna change about that. People say, 'Oh, you know, it's what's inside that counts.' If you think that, you're not human. Because that's, you know, it's just, it's sad. But that's the truth. People base relationships on looks nowadays, and there's nothing you can do.

Bobby doesn't like the fact that physical appearance is the basis for social interaction among teenagers. However, he also feels that he does not have any way to change it. He is resigned to accepting social pressure to conform to body ideals, in spite of his personal desire to do otherwise.

Bobby reluctantly accepts that body ideals matter, but he self-reflexively sees that as regrettable. Victor, on the other hand, is more unaware of his conflicted feelings. The interviewer noted that seventeen-year-old Victor did not conform to cultural ideals for male appearance, and Victor readily acknowledged that he was unhappy with his appearance and that it affected his self-esteem. At the same time, he was very critical of people who cared about appearance:
Victor: I don't know. I, I've always had a, a, um, problem with low self-esteem. Which I tried to get over but I just can't. I don't know. It's stupid, again.
Interviewer: Is there anything you would change about your physical appearance if you could?
Victor: Probably, yea.
Interviewer: Anything in particular?
Victor: I wouldn't be so fat...It's a big issue for some reason. Um, people are shallow and superficial, or they think they have to be, uh, to fit in. I think they should just try to be happy.

Victor tells the interviewer that he has never been happy with his appearance, and is particularly displeased with his weight. Not only that, but he consciously connects his unhappiness with his weight to what he sees as a long-standing problem with low self-esteem. However, he goes on to characterize people who try to conform to cultural body ideals as being “shallow and superficial”. Victor can articulate an alternative interpretation of body ideals and it appears that he would like to adopt that interpretation, but he is unable to do so when it comes to how he sees his own appearance. This is a frequent contradiction expressed by those who held a conflicted interpretation of body ideals. They used statements such as “it shouldn't matter, but...” or “I guess it doesn't matter too much, but…”

*Accepting: Everyone Wants to Look Good*

Forty-four of the boys interviewed accepted cultural body ideals as being important and also internalized those ideals personally. As compared to the conflicted boys, the accepting boys did not question the importance of physical appearance or the muscular ideal. Many of these teens did not rate physical appearance as being a huge issue in their lives; just because they accepted and internalized cultural male body ideals did not mean that felt tremendous pressure to conform to them. For them, wanting to be lean and muscular was just part of the routine of being an adolescent boy. Sixteen-year-old Tsong didn't question cultural body ideals, even though his own appearance did not conform:
Interviewer: In general, how happy or unhappy are you with your body and physical appearance?
Tsong: Uh, um, not real happy, I'd say. But it's not something that I, I would, um, really be intense on changing, or, uh, just pretty much figure this is what I look like. Can't do much about that. That's genes.
Interviewer: Right, right.
Tsong: And I think just about everybody would wish they were better looking. But I'm not going to obsess about it or really worry myself about it too much.

Just because a young man accepts and internalizes body ideals, it does not mean he is necessarily affected by them on a routine basis. For Tsong, wanting to look more like the ideal is typical, common, normal, and therefore unremarkable. On the other hand, some accepting boys do feel that body ideals are very important to them. Like the more passively accepting adolescents, these boys do not question body ideals. However, instead of seeing them as impractical ideal types, these boys aspire to actually achieve an ideal physical appearance. Fifteen-year-old Joe offers an insightful description of when and how he internalized cultural body ideals, and how he tries to achieve an ideal appearance:

I was pretty happy with my physical appearance until my friend came up and said, 'Wow, you could be so strong. You have a big frame.' He's like a little guy, so he wants to bulk up but he has nothing really to bulk up with. 'C'mon, you could be so sexy, and your girlfriend...', so pretty much I am challenged by him cause it's like, oh. Cause he has a six-pack, he's been doing weight lifting all this time. And my girlfriend seems to be going little, acting too familiar with him.

Joe does not question the idea that his girlfriend could find his more muscular friend attractive and accepts that he needs to become more muscular himself in order to prevent his girlfriend from losing interest in him. Physical appearance is important to Joe, specifically having a muscular physique. Once Joe's friend implied that Joe's appearance did not conform sufficiently to cultural ideals, Joe started lifting weights to try and change his physique. He went on to tell the interviewer that he had previously lifted weights because he
enjoyed it, but he was now doing it specifically to get the type of body he felt he needed in order to ensure that his girlfriend stayed with him.

**Rejecting: Other Kids Think It Matters**

The fourth interpretation of cultural male body ideals, given by 32 respondents, is to reject them outright. This is different from the teens who felt that body image didn't matter to anyone. These young men are aware of body ideals and see them as important to most adolescents, but they have personally chosen not to value physical appearance. Within this group, virtually every boy gave some variation of the statement, “Most guys want to be muscular, but that's not important to me.”

This group is also different from the adolescents who passively accepted body ideals and felt that wanting to be muscular was typical of all teens and therefore not a cause for concern. The boys who rejected body ideals likewise tended to believe that wanting to be muscular was typical, but they sought to distinguish themselves as being atypical in their rejecting of that belief. There is a common theme among those who reject body ideals that they are different from most people because they don't want to conform to cultural ideals.

Fourteen-year-old Alex stresses that it is “other people” who care about appearance:

Interviewer: Okay, um, is there anything you would change about your physical appearance if you could?
Alex: Um, I don't, I can't think of anything.
Interviewer: Nothing? Okay. Is, do you think that, um, well, do you think that physical appearance is an issue for other teenagers your age?
Alex: Yea, yea.
Interviewer: In what ways, do you think?
Alex: Um, you know, just trying to look like the people on TV and magazines and stuff. Just other people, not me. Not me. Just other people.
Interviewer: Right, right. That's the question, you know, other teenagers.
Alex: I don't really care too much about all that stuff.
While Alex emphasizes that he doesn't care about appearance, he does not have an alternative set of values in lieu of valuing body ideals. For Alex, and for many of those who reject body ideals, they use their rejection as a way to distinguish their own individuality. While “other people” want to look like the people they see on TV, Alex is unique because he does not.

Some young men, however, had a very clear alternative set of values that formed the basis for their rejection of body ideals. Sixteen-year-old Devon says that he is sometimes teased by his peers because of his appearance, but he focuses on his talent dancing as being more important and therefore doesn't value appearance in spite of being teased:

Interviewer: How much of an issue is physical appearance for you?
Devon: Um, it's not an issue to me.
Interviewer: Do you think it's an issue for other teens or other guys who think they care more about, you know, how they look and stuff?
Devon: Yea, most of them, they let other people get to them when they say they're ugly and everything. Most of them. But most of my friends, they're so funny and everything, they be talking about people, when they try and talk about them, they be funny.
Interviewer: Has anyone ever made fun of you or give you crap?
Devon: Yea, they make fun of me. But I make up for it, like, my activities. They can say I'm ugly, but I can dance.

Devon goes on to say that he doesn't strive for an ideal physique in order to attract woman because he treats women respectfully and he thinks that is more important than how he looks. This is in sharp contrast to Joe who felt that he needed to become more muscular in order to maintain his girlfriend's interest. Devon has an alternative value system that emphasizes his talents, dancing and having a good sense of humor, over his appearance. This allows him to be relatively unaffected by cultural body ideals even though he recognizes them and sees how they affect his peers.
Another alternative belief that several young men brought up as alternatives to valuing body ideals was the belief that God make them how they were and therefore they were happy and didn't think it was right to try and change their appearance. While these interviews were conducted for the National Study of Youth and Religion, participants were not told that the study was about religion and the questions about appearance came before questions about religion. It is therefore unlikely that they offered these responses due to any kind of priming or prompting, and yet several boys who rejected cultural body ideals offered a religious explanation for their views. Thirteen-year-old Trevor said that he was happy with his physical appearance, but that he did not think about it very much. He said, “I would have been happy no matter what way God made me.” Echoing these belief, fourteen-year-old Phillip said that he feels happy with his body, “Probably because I know that this is the body that God gave me and if He wanted me to have something more, He's probably gonna give it to me.”

**Culture in Action: Consequences of Cultural Body Ideals**

The final question I explore is how interpretations of the culture of musculality affect adolescent boys' actions or beliefs about themselves. One hallmark of the culture of thinness as it related to women is that it has a significant impact on women's behavior and self-concept. Women spend time and money striving for thinness, and being overweight is both a physical and moral failing. Do boys similarly feel bad about themselves when they think they fall short of achieving a muscular physique? To what extent does the culture of muscularity affect their everyday behavior?

Table 1.4 summarizes the three different ways in which boys are affected, or not, by cultural male body ideals and their interpretation of them. First, some boys are unaffected by cultural body ideals, either because they are unaware of them or because they make a
conscious decision to reject them. Among the remaining boys, some said that cultural ideals affected how they felt about themselves or how they wanted to look, but not their behavior. Finally, some said that body ideals affected both their beliefs and their actions. Seven interviews did not include enough information to code a response.

Table 1.4: Reactions to Male Body Ideals (N=116)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reaction</th>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unaffected</td>
<td>Unaware of body ideals or rejects them, no impact on actions or</td>
<td>“...not an issue at all.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>self-concept</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs affected</td>
<td>Would like to look different but do not act on that</td>
<td>“...there's very little you can do to change it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs and actions affected</td>
<td>Actively strive for ideal appearance</td>
<td>“I work out every day.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Unaffected by Body Culture*

A total of 39 respondents were unaffected by cultural male body ideals. This group included most of those who consciously rejected such ideals as being important, all the boys who were unaware of body ideals, and a few who were conflicted about whether body ideals mattered to them. This group of boys shared two things in common. First, they were generally satisfied with how they looked and did not want to change anything particular about their appearance. Second, their satisfaction with their appearance was not based on how they looked but stemmed from the relative lack of importance they placed on appearance in general. Because many of these young men were either unaware of body ideals or possessed some alternative value system that de-emphasized appearance as important to self-concept, it follows that they would be unaffected by cultural ideals.

The teens that were unaffected tended to give brief answers when asked to talk about how they felt about their appearance, as one might expect given that it was not a
relevant issue in their lives. Seventeen-year-old Wayne describes his appearance as “nerdy looking”, but says that there's nothing he would like to change about his appearance because physical appearance is “not an issue at all” for him. He is aware that his own appearance is very different from the cultural ideal for men, but it does not affect how he feels about himself because he rejects the idea that body ideals are important.

Nineteen-year-old Rico is also unaffected by body ideals, but he presents an interesting reversal on the body image and self-esteem link. Rico believes that as long as someone has high self-esteem, which he believes comes from one's parents, then that person will be happy with their appearance no matter how they look. Rico explains why he is “very happy” with his appearance:

Um, shit is a blessing from God that I am the way I am. I mean, there's kids out there, or, I mean, that have dyslexia and all different kinds of stuff. And, I mean, it's a blessing from God that I've got all my fingers, ten toes, big fat stomach, big head. I mean, everybody don't have that. Some people have low self-esteem, but I don't. Like I said, it's the way you're raised. If you're raised by a person or a parent that has low self-esteem, of course you going to raise your child the same way. It's, it's automatically, that's how you're going to raise your child. And my mom doesn't have anything about the way she looks. That's the way that gave me life, so why should I? That's the way I look at it.

While Rico can point to some specific things that he is happy with regarding his appearance, his fingers and his large stomach for example, they are not things that are emphasized in cultural ideals of the male body. Rather, Rico feels good about his appearance for reasons that have nothing to do with body ideals and everything to do with parental approval and his personal feeling of self-worth.

*Body Culture Affects Beliefs*

Among the young men who were affected by cultural ideals of the male body, thirty-two said that these ideals affected how they thought about their appearance, but had little or
no impact on their behavior. Many of these young men wanted to be strong or muscular in the same sense that many young women want to be thin. Unlike women who often actively try to achieve thinness, these young men did not feel pressure to actually try and achieve muscularity. They were affected by body ideals in the sense that they placed value on having a muscular physique, but that value did not cause them to invest themselves in any action aimed at achieving such a physique. For these adolescents, there were not social consequences for failing to work towards an ideal body.

Many of the teens who feel in this category were those who were conflicted about the value of body ideals in the first place. They are aware of body ideals and do value having a muscular appearance, but at the same time they see valuing appearance as being superficial or futile. For example, sixteen-year-old Terry says that he is “pretty happy” with his appearance, but he would change it if he could:

Interviewer: In general, how happy or unhappy are you with your body and physical appearance?
Terry: Um, I'm pretty happy with it. I mean, there's no use in being unhappy with it because there's very little you can do to change it.
Interviewer: Anything you would change if you could?
Terry: Mmm, I wouldn't want to be so scrawny.

Terry is clearly aware of cultural ideals valuing a muscular male body, and wishes he could have that physique, but his belief does not result in him doing anything in order to try and change his appearance. Body ideals affect how Terry would like to look, but not how he actually looks. A common theme among adolescents like Terry was that they would like to be muscular, but they didn't care enough about it to make the ideal a reality.

*Body Culture in Action*

The final group of boys, forty-five in total, are those whose beliefs and actions were influenced by cultural body ideals. These young men personified Bourdieu's depiction of the
body as a project to be shaped and controlled, and they saw deviation from body ideals as personal failings. Among this group, some felt that body ideals were realistic goals, and they actively engaged in activities to make themselves more muscular. Other boys in this group took steps to keep their bodies hidden from others when they felt they had failed to adequately manage their appearance.

Fifteen-year-old Todd, for example, says that he is “mostly unhappy” with his weight because other students at his school make fun of him. Todd describes what he does in order to hide what he sees as his failure to sufficiently control his body:

I don't really worry about it anymore except for my weight. You know, I don't, if I take my shirt off, you know I [weigh too much]. I don't want anyone else knowing about it. Not anyone I don't know, you know, um, just because I'm overweight. I don't even know if I'm overweight, but just the fact that I have a big gut is just a little disturbing.

While Todd is somewhat ambivalent on the question of whether he is overweight, he is aware that others interpret his appearance as being overweight. He therefore regulates his actions in order to hide his body and avoid letting others see what he perceives as his failure to achieve a lean and muscular body.

On the other hand, some young men whose actions and beliefs are affected by body culture direct their efforts towards achieving what they see as the ideal male appearance. Fourteen-year-old Martin, whom the interviewer described as “fairly athletic looking”, tells the interviewer that he spends a lot of time and effort trying to become more muscular:

Interviewer: Okay, how much of an issue is physical appearance for you?
Martin: Not that big. I mean, I work out every day, but it's not killing me like I work out twelve hours a day.
Interviewer: Okay, if you knew that working out four hours a day would get you muscles, would you do it?
Martin: Probably.
While Martin initially offers that physical appearance is not a big issue to him, he is clearly willing to invest a considerable amount of time and effort in making his body more muscular. Martin saw his body as a project that he needed to work on, but doing so was not unusual. As long as his efforts to shape his body fell within what he saw as a normal range, he didn't see it is being exceptional.

This belief that controlling and shaping the body is a normal activity was echoed by other young men in the study. They often spoke about their body-related actions as routine obligations. Paul, a sixteen-year-old football player, described how he reacted to a recent weight gain following a sports injury:

I have to say, I broke my leg and put on about thirty pounds eating ice cream, so that kind of sucks. But until, but I'll get it back. I have to say, I'm working hard. I'm making progress. I'm bound to be where I need to be.

It is notable that Paul does not talk about losing weight and regaining his muscular physique as something he wants to do. He says that he “needs to” weigh less. Later in his interview, he uses similar language when he says, “I need to get my leg muscles back up to speed.” For Paul, there is a standard for what is an acceptable appearance and achieving that appearance is a requirement that requires work. It is interesting, however, that a few minutes after the conversation above, Paul seems to reverse himself by saying that physical appearance is not important to him. He explains, “I just want to be happy and not focus on my imperfections.” He also says that he feels most teenagers care too much about their appearance and that worrying about how you look is “just a waste of [your] time. You're just going to be depressed.”

Paul's simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the culture of muscularity is not unique. Many of the young men whose beliefs and actions were influenced by cultural body
ideals were unaware of their own acceptance of these ideals. They saw the body as something to be working on and shaped, but they approached this task in a pragmatic manner and tended to disavow what they saw as excessive emotionality or anxiety about appearance. What Paul was expressing in his last statement was not that body ideals were unimportant, but that worrying about body ideals was unproductive. Rather than concerning himself with his appearance, he believed that if he worked hard he could achieve the appearance he wanted. Paul accepted cultural body ideals as important and expressed these ideals through action, but he saw emotion as being unproductive when it came to accomplishing the task at hand, making his body muscular.

Conclusion

The first objective of this study was to understand how adolescent boys define cultural male body ideals. I found that most of the teens who were interviewed felt that the ideal male body was muscular and not overweight. While only a few boys specifically mentioned thinness as an ideal, it was clear that most felt men should be slender enough to have visible muscularity. Several young men specified that thinness in the absence of muscularity was undesirable. Many young men also talked about a related ideal which valued strength and athletic performance. To them, men should be strong, be able to play sports or engage in other athletic activities well, and be attractive to women.

A less-commonly mentioned dimension of cultural male body ideals was clothing, but some boys did feel that it was important for them to wear particular clothes or to be well-groomed. The boys who emphasized fashion as an important dimension of male body ideals tended to recognize the role that attire played in signifying group identity. Finally, some boys thought of body ideals as applying only to women. These young men perceived
the culture of thinness ideals, but rejected the idea that there were any cultural ideals for male bodies because physical appearance was inherently a women's issue.

The second question I explored was what strategies adolescent boys use to interpret these cultural ideals and make sense of how they apply to them personally. I found that the boys who accepted cultural male body ideals and internalized them tended to be happy with their appearance when they felt that they had a muscular physique, and they were unhappy when they felt that they were overweight or not muscular enough. In either case, these young men did not doubt or question the value of musculature.

Another group of young men also accepted cultural male body ideals as being important, but they were more conflicted about whether they personally valued musculature or whether it had value only because it affected how they were viewed and treated by others. These young men often expressed reservations about the importance placed on physical appearance, and they discussed the social consequences of being overweight or not muscular. However, in spite of their reservations, they also said that musculature or athleticism were important to them.

I did discover that just under a third of the participants in this study rejected cultural male body ideals outright. Most of these boys reported that physical appearance was important to other teenagers their age, but they personally had decided it was not something they valued. These boys often had an alternative ideology that gave them a basis for self-identity or self-worth that was not dependent on physical appearance. These alternative ideologies included: valuing individuality or uniqueness, seeing the body as a creation by God, or finding self-worth in one's skills and talents independent from appearance.

The last question I examined was how a young man's interpretation of cultural male body ideals affected his beliefs about himself or routine activities. Do body ideals and how
they are interpreted affect an adolescent's lived experience? I found that, for almost half of the boys in this study, body culture was manifested in their routine activities and self-concept. Examples of how the culture of muscularity was expressed in action include restricting calories or avoiding some foods, exercising and lifting weights, playing sports, or dressing to hide one's body. Many young men talked about these activities as things they had to do rather than things they had chosen to do.

I also found that, for some boys, body ideals were manifested internally but did not have any impact on their behavior or daily activities. These boys valued being muscular as important and often felt dissatisfied with themselves when they failed to achieve muscularity, but they did not translate this dissatisfaction into action. For these young men, muscularity was not realistically obtainable so the ideal affected their beliefs but not their actions.

There are some limitations to note about these findings. First, this study used a semi-structured interview format which did not present respondents with an opportunity to elaborate on some of the issues discussed during the interviews. Particularly when the interviewer did not probe for more information, several respondents gave short answers to the questions about body image which did not include a lot of detail. It is possible that some of the boys who were coded as being unaware of, or unaffected by, body ideals were coded as such because the interviewer did not probe for further information.

Second, my analysis relies only on self-reported information from respondents rather than observations of their actual behavior. Given that many of the young men had conflicted feelings about body ideals and contradicted themselves when they explained how they interpreted these ideals, it is possible that a researcher observing their behavior would see something different than what they reported to the interviewer. Among all participants, I believe it is most likely that mis-reporting could be an issue for those who had conflicted
feelings about cultural body ideals and those who said that body ideals affected their beliefs but not their actions. Further ethnographic research will be valuable in addressing this limitation.

Another important subject for further research highlighted by this study is a more detailed exploration of the alternative ideologies that some young men rely on to reject cultural body ideals as being a source of self-worth. The young men who explicitly rejected the culture of muscularity in favor of another ideology were generally able to clearly articulate their beliefs, were satisfied with their appearance, and had high self-esteem. Several of these young men mentioned learning alternative values from parents or religious teachings that facilitated their rejection of cultural body ideals. Further research on alternatives to the culture of muscularity could shed light on the question of why some young men internalize these ideals while others do not.

Compared to teenage girls, this research suggests that boys have access to a wider range of cultural body ideals. While the muscular ideal is clearly present, it is not recognized or accepted as universally as the thin ideal is among women. Whether or not a woman chooses to accept the thin ideal, she is likely aware that Western culture values female thinness. I find, however, that there is not a universal consensus among adolescent boys regarding what the ideal male body is or what attributes are culturally valued. While some boys do feel pressured to strive for muscularity, and experience social and self-esteem consequences when they fail to achieve it, there is more diversity among how men interpret body ideals and are affected by them than among women. In particular, boys have a range of alternative ideologies they can draw upon which serve to buffer them from the culture of muscularity.
When looking at the diverse strategies used by young men to interpret body ideals, I find that they incorporate themes relating to defining masculinity, differentiating between aesthetic and performance, and negotiating changing cultural ideals. The culture of muscularity does affect the actions and beliefs of many young men as they strive to achieve an ideal physical appearance, or develop dissatisfaction with their appearance when they fail to do so. However, it is important to recognize that not all boys are affected in the same way, nor do all boys share the same interpretation of what body ideals mean. While definitions and interpretations differ, there are clear linkages between the importance these young men place on muscularity and how body image ideals affect their lives. Understanding this relationship between culture, values, and action elucidates not only how cultural male body ideals manifest in the lives of adolescent boys, but also illustrates the strategies young people use to interpret and evaluate complex cultural messages in their everyday lives.
REFERENCES


CHAPTER 2

PATHWAYS TO STATUS AND PEER ESTEEM: FACTORS PROMOTING AND INHIBITING DIETING AMONG ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS

Dieting is a complex social behavior, especially among young women, related to status and peer regard, gender, and identity. Sociological approaches to understanding dieting have evolved significantly over the past forty years. An early study of the social psychology of dieting focused on developing a rational choice process model to explain dieting (Dwyer, Feldman, and Mayer 1970). The process begins with a person deciding that they weigh more than they want, and ends with the person initiating dieting with the intention of losing weight. Since then, however, more attention has been paid to the symbolic meaning of dieting and the relationship between dieting and what researchers term the “culture of thinness” (for examples, see (Bordo 1993; Carr and Friedman 2005; Hesse-Biber 2007; Nichter 2000). It is now generally accepted that dieting is a social behavior among young women that largely emerges from a culture that values and even mandates thinness as an imperative. With this study, I add to this body of research by examining whether the relationship between dieting and status for young women changes during the transition to adulthood.

I agree with researchers who have claimed that, particularly among adolescent girls, dieting is frequently motivated by objectives other than wanting to lose weight (Calderon, Yu, and Jambazian 2004; Nichter 2000; Strong and Huon 1998). A rational choice process model does not sufficiently explain dieting among young women when the only assumed objective is to lose weight. However, the “culture of thinness” theory is also lacking by
failing to account for changes in dieting patterns as young women transition to adulthood or for variation in the degree to which teenage girls are affected by the thin ideal. I propose that there are patterns of dieting that emerge during adolescence and then change in early adulthood. I look at context-specific pathways to status: sports and academic achievement in high school; marriage, career, and parenthood in early adulthood. I analyze whether women who have access to these pathways to status diet less, and whether there are differences between the degree to which status pathways predict dieting during adolescence and early adulthood.

**Significance**

Dieting, defined as limiting or restricting one's daily food intake in some manner, is widely associated with attempting to lose weight. The majority of people who take some course of action to lose weight either diet or increase their physical activity, or both. Dieting takes many forms, from limiting one's calories to within CDC recommended limits to eliminating entire food groups such as the popular Atkins Diet which forbids carbohydrates or low-fat diets which avoid red meat and fat (Kruger et al. 2004). While dieting to lose weight was once undertaken primarily by overweight adults, today between 40 and 60 percent of girls age 13 to 17 report that they are dieting at any given time (Calderon, Yu, and Jambazian 2004).

Understanding which girls diet as adolescents and what may be motivating their behavior is important for several reasons. First, adolescence is the time of life at which many eating disorders present (Godley 2004). There is evidence that eating patterns acquired during adolescence tend to persist into adulthood. Teenage girls who habitually restrict their calorie intake are at greater risk for eating disorders such as anorexia, and they
are more likely to develop nutritionally-inadequate eating habits (Croll et al. 2002; Striegel-Moore et al. 2004).

Second, there is no evidence to suggest that dieting is effective in reducing adolescent obesity. The Center for Disease Control guidelines classify an adolescent as “at risk for being overweight” if their BMI is at or above the 85th percentile while adolescents at or above the 95th percentile are “at risk for obesity”. However, dieting is not advised even for most children in this category (Berg 2000). A Baylor College of Medicine publication for parents advises, “Weight management programs for all but the most severely overweight children and adolescents should not focus on weight loss. Instead, the goal is to keep weight stable while the child gets taller and more muscular over time.” (Baylor College 2007). Dieting among adolescents is generally an unhealthy and medically-inadvisable behavior, so understanding its prevalence among teenage girls is important.

Finally, dieting is linked with negative body image and low self-esteem. While non-health outcomes related to dieting have been under-studied, some studies have shown that people who diet have lower self-esteem than their non-dieting peers of the same weight (Jones, Vigfusdottir, and Lee 2004; Thompson and Digsby 2004). Because dieting does not usually result in lasting weight loss, dieters tend to experience frustration and a sense of failure.

**Background**

In 1970, dieting was theorized as a “logical terminal behavior resulting from a stepwise choice of a certain set of options” (Dwyer, Feldman, and Mayer 1970). This presumed that the first step in this series of events is making the decision that one weighs too much, or at least that one would like to weigh less (it is likely that many adolescent dieters simultaneously recognize that they do not weigh “too much” and also wish to weigh
less). The key question is: why do dieting adolescents wish to weigh less, or as I frame it: why do they say they want to weigh less? Answering this question requires a shift away from thinking about dieting as the terminal stage of a series of health-related decisions, and towards seeing it as a social behavior about shared group experiences, gender expectations, and the cultural valuation of thinness. The rational choice model outlined above is not necessarily flawed, it is simply limited by a set of inputs and motivations that fail to account for the range of goals that motivate dieting. I argue that thinness is not the primary motivation for dieting, at least not among adolescent girls. Rather, dieting can be motivated by a desire for peer esteem and social acceptance.

Dieting isn't just something women do; it is something they do publicly and in groups. Nichter's (2000) study of “fat talk” among middle school girls found that talking about dieting was an essential element of peer-group interaction. Virtually all the girls she interviewed acknowledged participating in self-denigrating discussions with their friends about their need to diet and lose weight. They further acknowledged that girls who did not participate in these types of discussions would be ostracized and criticized. However, Nichter found that the majority of girls she interviewed were not actually dieting – they were only talking about dieting.

Studies of older adolescents and young women, however, have found that many women at those ages are actually dieting as well as continuing to talk about dieting. In her study of college-age women, Hesse-Biber (2007) found that over three-fourths of the women she interviewed had ever been on a diet and 37% reported dieting “most of the time”. By early adulthood, women had gone from talking about dieting as a social activity to actively dieting in order to control their weight and manage their bodies. Hesse-Biber describes this change as “joining the cult of thinness”.

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These findings taken together suggest that dieting may mean something different for adolescents than it does for young women. I propose that as young women transition out of the peer-centered environment of school, dieting changes from being a status pathway to a behavior representing the internalized acceptance of a thin ideal. Dieting in high school is a bonding ritual for adolescent girls associated with peer regard. However, by early adulthood “fat talk” becomes more of an internal conversation. Women diet both during adolescence and early adulthood, but I theorize that the group-acceptance benefits of dieting are limited to the school environment. By early adulthood, “social dieting” to fit in with peers is increasingly replaced by goal-oriented dieting to lose weight.

**Dieting and Status**

Any discussion of status requires a clear definition of what status means and how people obtain it. In this study, I define “status” as peer esteem or group acceptance, and a “status pathway” is a *role or attribute* with the potential to increase peer regard and social acceptance. Status pathways include formal roles, such as being an athlete or a spouse, and status characteristics such as being attractive or wealthy.

Role theorists such as Sieber (1974) and Marks (1977), proposed that people experience benefits from acquiring potentially status-conferring roles. In this sense, status is defined as peer esteem and regard, which also brings ego gratification, more social connections, and higher self-esteem. Teenagers do not have many opportunities to gain status through formal roles; such opportunities are generally limited to roles available within the school environment. Studies examining whether adolescents gain peer esteem through formal roles have yielded mixed findings.

Some studies have indicated that, while girls who play sports do have higher academic outcomes, they do not experience the same social or self-esteem benefits that male
athletes do (Tracy and Erkut 2002; Videon 2002). Similarly, by middle-school girls report that they value popularity over academic achievement, and achievement is not predictive of popularity (Eder 1985). Furthermore, these first two pathways are not easily accessible; only a few students can stand out as academic superstars and the highly-regarded athletes have generally been learning their sport for years. However, young women can control their weight. If few formal roles are available as status pathways for adolescents, perhaps status characteristics such as appearance become more important pathways. Some girls may see being thin (and by implication, attractive) as their only opportunity to gain status among their peers. As Daisy said about her daughter in The Great Gatsby, “...I hope she'll be a fool -- that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.”

This ties in to the second type of status pathway, status via individual characteristics. Berger, Cohen, and Zelditch (1972) describe how status characteristics develop from nominal characteristics within a group, characteristics such as race or gender. Group members who possess the status characteristic are assumed to also possess other positive attributes and are more likely to be afforded peer regard and status within the group. Webster and Driskell (1983) examined whether beauty functions as a status characteristic and found that attractiveness met “the same defining criteria” as race and gender for operating as a status characteristic. Because thinness is closely associated with beauty for woman, dieting may be a pathway to status and a way for young women to express their shared valuation of thinness as a status characteristic.

There is empirical evidence to support the theoretical relationship between dieting and status pathways. Previous studies have found that adolescents who derive most or all of their social status from a single role are more likely to exhibit disordered eating behavior and negative body image (Littleton and Ollendick 2003). On the topic of body image, research
has suggested that young women who have multiple roles and social connections which afford them peer esteem are more likely to have positive body image (Brumberg 1998). Finally, teenage girls with higher socio-economic status are less likely to either feel dissatisfied with their appearance or engage in unhealthy weight-loss behaviors such as skipping meals or purging after meals (Story et al. 1995). This last finding suggests the possibility that the social status and ego gratification derived from thinness is especially important to young women who do not derive these things through other status characteristics. Just as any one role carries more weight the fewer roles a person has, the social benefits of thinness become more crucial when these are fewer other pathways available to attain those benefits.

**A Note on Gender and Pubertal Development**

Dieting is well established as a female behavior; young men are overwhelmingly more likely to express a desire to become more muscular than to lose weight (McCabe, Ricciardelli, and Finemore 2002; Ricciardelli and McCabe 2003). Even when they do diet, boys are less likely to do so publicly or to discuss dieting with their peers (Nichter 2000). Young women are not only encouraged but expected to monitor their food consumption in order to manage their weight (for examples, see Bordo 1993; Brumberg 1998; Carr and Friedman 2005; Wolf 1991). Among adolescent girls, dieting is a way of “doing gender” because striving for thinness is a generally female concern (Williams 2002). For this reason, I limit this study to an examination of the relationship between dieting and status pathways only among young women and not men.

A final consideration for understanding dieting during the teenage years is that adolescence involves not only a unique social environment but unique physical changes as well. There are social reasons why teenage girls diet more than teenage boys, and these are
closely intertwined with the physical experience of puberty (Ge et al. 2001; McCabe, Ricciardelli, and Finemore 2002). During adolescence, girls experience significant physical changes in their bodies as a result of puberty. The two most obvious changes, breast growth and hip development, transform a girl’s body from being thin to being more “curvy”. It is not surprising that many teenage girls initiate dieting during puberty in an attempt to avoid the normal weight gain that occurs during this time. For this reason, my analyses include control variables for several measures of pubertal development, discussed in more detail in the measurement section of this paper.

**Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses**

Thus my theoretical frame work is shown in Figure 1. First, young women who have multiple pathways to status, via formal roles or individual attributes, are less reliant on thinness as a status characteristic. Second, young women who remain in school are more likely to diet because they have access to fewer status pathways and spend more time in a single peer-centered social group.
In the absence of other status pathways for girls to gain ego gratification and peer esteem, achieving them based on appearance may especially important during adolescence. Alternative pathways to status available to high school girls are playing sports, participating in school organizations, or academic achievement. Such activities and accomplishments can provide status-conferring opportunities which, in turn, may lessen the importance of attaining status through any single pathway. Therefore girls who are members of sports teams or school organizations may be less likely to diet. Likewise girls with high academic achievement will be less likely to diet.

As girls transition in to adulthood, the key contextual influence on dieting is whether they remain in a peer-centered environment similar to high school. Because dieting is a public, social, and shared behavior, it operates as a status pathway only as long as a woman is in an environment that facilitates such interaction. Life course researchers have found that college is, for many young people, an extension of adolescence (Buchmann 1989; Cote
2000). I hypothesize that the longer a young woman remains in a peer-centered environment (school), the more likely she is to diet. However, women who complete college will be no more or less likely to diet than those who never attended college. This is because the expectation that a woman will denigrate her body and engage in fat talk is a especially strong in the peer-focused environments of high school and college.

Returning to role theory, I expected role accumulation to decrease dieting since young women who acquire new roles will have alternative pathways to status. However, clearly the pathways to status available to young women are very different than those available to teenage girls. Rather than deriving status through sports or academic achievement, young women are more likely to derive it through marriage, a career, or parenthood. I therefore test whether women who gain these new pathways to status during early adulthood are less likely to diet than their peers. Based on the theoretical framework outlined above, I hypothesize the following:

A. Adolescent dieting is positively related to pubertal development.
B. Adolescent girls who play sports, belong to school clubs, and have a higher GPA will be less likely to diet.
C. Dieting will be more prevalent among young women who are in college than among women who either never attend college or who attended and left.
D. Young women who get married, have a full-time career, or become a parent during the transition to adulthood will be less likely to diet.

Data

I test these hypotheses using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally representative school-based longitudinal study focusing on health-related behaviors among adolescents and young adults (Udry 1994). Add Health began in
1994 with a survey of over 90,000 students at 132 schools in grades seven through twelve. A sub-sample of 12,105 participants was selected for an in-home interview. Several populations were oversampled including minority students, students with disabilities, and twins. The sub-sample also included all students at sixteen of the schools originally sampled. This resulted in a final wave one sample size of 20,754 (Harris et al. 2003).

Participants have been re-interviewed twice since then in 1996 and 2001-2002. During the second wave, 14,738 participants who had completed the wave one in-home interview were re-interviewed. The third wave of data collection included interviews with 15,197 of the original participants who were then between 18 and 26 years old. The change in sample size between waves one and two is partially due to the fact that subjects in the 12th grade at wave one who were not part of the genetic sample were dropped from wave two. Subjects who were only in the disabled sample were also dropped (Harris et al. 2003).

Analytic Sample

My analyses rely on data collected at wave one and wave three. This is because wave two data was collected only one year after wave one, and it is unlikely that many participants experienced significant role transitions during that time. Because the focus of this study is the transition to adulthood, the time between waves one and three is the most suitable time period to cover. I only include women in the sample because social norms and meanings associated with dieting are different for men and women. I exclude women who were pregnant at either wave one or three because presumably they would not be dieting during their pregnancies.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selection Criteria</th>
<th>Cases Remaining</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participated in waves one and three</td>
<td>15,170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in in-school survey</td>
<td>11,276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not pregnant at wave 3</td>
<td>10,956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only women</td>
<td>6,219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In high school at wave 1</td>
<td>4,736</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.1 presents a description of the analytic sample. Of those who participated in both waves one and three, I cut respondents who did not participate in the school survey because they did not report the clubs they belonged to or the sports they played at school, key independent variables in this analysis. I then removed pregnant woman and all men from the sample. The final analytic sample of 4,736 included only girls who were in high school at wave one. This is because younger middle-school girls are not likely to have had the opportunity to experience any of the status pathway events during early adulthood. Also, most middle schools do not have as many opportunities to participate in sports or school clubs.

Measures

I use dieting as the dependent variable in all my models. For the first two analyses, I am predicting whether a girl says that she is dieting or not during wave one (ages 13-18). For the last two, I am measuring dieting at wave three (ages 18-26). While the measures of dieting at each wave are slightly different, they are comparable.

Dieting

The Add Health survey asked wave one respondents, “Are you currently trying to gain weight, lose weight, or stay the same weight?” Those who indicated that they were not trying to do anything about their weight we coded as such, but the option was not read in
the question. In wave three, the same question was asked but the phrase, “...or are you not trying to do anything about your weight?” was added.

Respondents who indicated that they were either trying to lose weight or trying to stay the same weight were then asked a series of questions regarding things they had done in the previous seven days in order to lose weight or stay the same weight. To measure dieting at wave one (adolescence), I use the following question, “During the past seven days, which of the following things did you do in order to lose weight or to keep from gaining weight: Dieted?” I create a dummy variable coded 1 for women who said that they had dieted and 0 for those who had not.

At wave three, respondents who said they were trying to lose weight or stay the same weight were asked, “Which of the following things did you do during the past seven days in order to lose weight or stay the same weight? Indicate all that apply. 1) Dieted—that is, ate pre-packaged weight-loss meals, fewer calories, or less fat.” I create a dummy variable for dieting at wave 3 (early adulthood) coded 1 for women who said they had dieted and 0 for those who had not.

For the wave three sample, I also included as dieting women who stated that they had, in the prior seven days, tried to control their weight by fasting or skipping meals. I count this as dieting because it meets the criteria of limiting one's caloric intake. This option was not available during wave one, but I believe it is reasonable to assume that any girls who were skipping meals at wave one would report that they were dieting since no specific definition of dieting was provided in the question at wave one.

There were several other questions asked about various behaviors a respondent may have undertaken in order to lose or maintain her weight. These responses varied from wave one to wave three, but included actions such as: made yourself vomit, took diet pills, took
food supplements, or exercised. I elected only to look at dieting because dieting is more widespread among adolescent girls than any of the other options. While some adolescents and young women do take these alternative approaches to losing weight, they are not socially accepted in the same way that dieting is.

The exception to this is exercise, which is as accepted, if not more so, than dieting. I exclude exercising to lose weight from my analysis because it is a qualitatively different behavior than dieting. Exercise has proven health benefits, is advisable for almost all women of any age, and is not a behavior solely associated with weight loss. Furthermore, dieting is a prominent theme in shared “fat talk” during which girls and young women denigrate their appearance and encourage dieting. Exercise, even exercise for weight loss, is not a part of this discourse.

Independent Variables

To measure pubertal development, I use four different measures: two measuring development since elementary school and two measuring development as compared to one's peers. Girls were asked the following questions at wave one:

As a girl grows up her breasts develop and get bigger. Which sentence best describes you:
1. My breasts are about the same size as when I was in grade school.
2. My breasts are a little bigger than when I was in grade school.
3. My breasts are somewhat bigger than when I was in grade school.
4. My breasts are a lot bigger than when I was in grade school.
5. My breasts are a whole lot bigger than when I was in grade school, they are as developed as a grown woman’s breasts.

As a girl grows up her body becomes more curved. Which sentence best describes you:
1. My body is about as curvy as when I was in grade school.
2. My body is a little more curvy than when I was in grade school.
3. My body is somewhat more curvy than when I was in grade school.
4. My body is a lot more curvy than when I was in grade school.
5. My body is a whole lot more curvy than when I was in grade school.
I include a variable for each of these questions in the models in order to measure female physical development through puberty. I also measure comparative development: how developed a girl feels she is relative to her peers. To measure this, I use the question:

How advanced is your physical development compared to other girls your age?
1. I look younger than most
2. I look younger then some
3. I look about average
4. I look older than some
5. I look older than most.

Finally, I include an interviewer-scored measure of how developed a girl is compared to other girls her age. The response options and coding of this variable are the same as the self-reported comparative development question.

The second hypothesis examines whether adolescent female dieting is less common among girls who participate in high school sports or school-based clubs/organizations. I measure this as a simple count of the number of sports a girl indicates she plays and the number of clubs she belongs to. This information was collected during the in-school survey when participants were asked to indicate whether or not they belonged to a series of listed clubs and sports teams. The clubs and activities listed were: French club, German club, Latin club, Spanish club, book club, computer club, debate team, drama club, Future Farmers of America, history club, science club, math club, band, choir, orchestra, other club, newspaper, honor society, student council, yearbook. The sports listed were: cheerleading/dance team, baseball/softball, basketball, field hockey, football, ice hockey, soccer, swimming, tennis, track, volleyball, wrestling, other sport. Approximately 15% of the girls indicated that they did not participate in any sports, clubs, or organizations.
This hypothesis also addresses whether academic achievement is a status pathway associated with dieting. I measure academic achievement by calculating a girl’s GPA based on her self-reported grades from the previous semester. For each of four core subjects, Math, science, social studies, and English, respondents are given 4 points for an A, 3 for a B, 2 for a C, and 1 for a D or lower. I then calculate an average of the four subjects and use that for GPA. For students who did not report all four grades, I take the average of whichever grades they did report.

Third, I measure whether a woman who remains in a peer-centered environment at wave three is more likely to diet. I create a dummy variable coded 1 if the woman reports that she is a full-time college student and 0 for all others. I also create dummy variables indicating whether a woman never attended college after high school, or whether she did attend but no longer attends (either graduated or left without completing a degree). This allows me to specifically measure the effect of being in the college environment, as compared to all other options.

The final hypothesis examines whether people who accumulate new roles during the transition to adulthood are less likely to diet. While there are many roles and status opportunities available to young women between the ages of 22 and 26 (wave three age range of wave one high school students), I choose to focus on the transition-to-adulthood that are the most common: entering the full-time labor force, marriage, and parenthood. I consider a woman to have acquired a work role if she reports at wave three that she is employed at least 35 hours per week. I measure having acquired a spouse role as whether a women reports she is married, although I exclude women who were already married at wave one because they did not acquire a new spousal role. I elect to measure whether a woman has acquired a parent role based on whether she resides with a biological, adopted, or step-
child. While the roles of biological or adoptive parent are likely experienced differently by women than the role of step-parent, they are similar in terms of social role identity.

*Control Variables*

I include the same set of control variables in all my analyses. First, I include dummy variables for race. The variables are: white, black, and “other race”, and I use white as the reference category. I use these categories because past research has found that black adolescents are less likely to diet than whites, but there are no consistent patterns among other racial groups. Therefore it would not be efficient to include more refined racial categories.

I also control for weight in all my analyses. I include a variable for Body Mass Index (BMI) which is calculated using self-reported height and weight. At wave three, objective measures of height and weight were available. While it would be ideal to use these figures, I use the self-reported values for comparability; objective measure of height and weight were not taken at wave one. For the models looking at dieting at wave three, I control for both BMI and change in BMI between waves one and three. This controls both for a women's weight and for any weight gain or loss between high school and early adulthood.

I control for parent's income in the wave one models, as reported on the parent survey. In the models examining dieting at wave three, I include a control variable for the respondent's income. This variable combines answers to the question “What was your total income in [previous year]?” and answers to the question “What is your best guess of your income?” Respondents who answered the first question by saying they did not know their income were asked for their “best guess”.

Finally, I include a control variable for age. During wave one, the respondents were between the ages of 11 and 18, while at wave three they ranged from 22 to 26. I measure
age using a continuous variable rather than a categorical one. I ran the models using grade in school instead of age to see whether there was a categorical effect, and the results did not differ. I therefore control for age throughout.

**Method**

To test each of these hypotheses, I use logistic regression models predicting dieting as a binary outcome: a girl either is or is not dieting. The results indicate the likelihood a girl is dieting based on the variables in the model. The general equation is as follows:

\[
p_a = \frac{\exp(c + b_1X_{i1} + b_2X_{i2} + ... + b_nX_{in} + e)}{[1 + \exp(c + b_1X_{i1} + b_2X_{i2} + ... + b_nX_{in} + e)]}
\]

**Analysis**

Descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Table 2.2. During adolescence, 22.52% of high school girls indicated that they had dieted during the previous seven days, while that percent increased to 34.71% during early adulthood. Just over half the sample (54%) did not diet at either time. The mean age at wave one was 16 years old, while the mean age at wave three was 23. By wave three, 36.81% of girls were in college, 43.4% were employed full-time, 19.53% were married, and 32.74% were caring for a child.
Table 2.2: Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Freq</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dieting at W1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22.52%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dieting at W3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>34.71%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College student at W3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>36.81%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time worker at W3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>43.40%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married at W3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19.53%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent at W3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>32.74%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>63.04%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24.60%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other race</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.37%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income W3 (in 1000's)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>11.58</td>
<td>15.53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent's income W1 (in 1000's)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>999</td>
<td>47.52</td>
<td>54.77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age W3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22.64</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI W1</td>
<td>11.75</td>
<td>49.12</td>
<td>6.45</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI W3</td>
<td>14.88</td>
<td>64.56</td>
<td>25.78</td>
<td>6.45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reported breast development</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reported hip development</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>1.03</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reported development compared to peers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer-scored development</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of sports played W1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of clubs W1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA most recent grading period W1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age W1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16.16</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI change W1 to W3</td>
<td>-16.71</td>
<td>29.29</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On average, the girls in the sample gained 3 BMI points between high school and early adulthood. The mean BMI at wave three was 25.78, which is very close to the medical
criteria of being overweight (BMI over 25) \(^1\). There is also more variation in BMI at wave three than at wave one.

*Predictors of Adolescent Dieting*

Table 2.3 presents the odds ratios from logistic regression models predicting adolescent dieting. Model one presents only the control variables. As expected, black girls are 47\% as likely to diet as their white peers. Also not surprisingly, girls who weigh more were more likely to diet. A 1-point increase in BMI score is associated with a 14\% increase in a girl’s likelihood of dieting. These findings remain consistent throughout all the models presented.

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\(^1\) It is worth noting that while the BMI>25 criteria for overweight is the most widely-accepted criteria, there is significant debate as to what the classification of “overweight” means from a health perspective.
### Table 2.3: Logistic Odds Ratios Predicting Dieting at Wave 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>1.08</td>
<td>1.04</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>(0.79)</td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>1.12 ***</td>
<td>1.13 ***</td>
<td>1.14 ***</td>
<td>1.11 ***</td>
<td>1.12 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9.90)</td>
<td>(9.47)</td>
<td>(10.03)</td>
<td>(10.33)</td>
<td>(8.25)</td>
<td>(8.31)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.85 **</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-2.09)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(-2.66)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of clubs</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.06</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.26)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(2.04)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.72)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reported breast development</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>(0.85)</td>
<td>(0.43)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reported hip development</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>(0.33)</td>
<td>(0.54)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reported relative development</td>
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<td>1.25 **</td>
<td>(2.82)</td>
<td>(2.92)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer-reported development</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>(1.45)</td>
<td>(1.43)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

Models two through four test whether various high school status pathways reduce a girl’s likelihood of dieting. Model three shows that girls who play sports are 11% less likely to diet for each sport they play, as compared to girls who play no sports. Model four indicates that there is no significant association between high school club membership and dieting. Model five finds that, contrary to expectations, girls with a higher GPA are more likely to diet rather than less likely. Each 1-point increase in GPA is associated with a 19% increased likelihood of dieting.
Model five presents the relationship between pubertal development and dieting. I find that self-reported measures of pubertal development since elementary school are not significant predictors of dieting. Neither measures of hip nor breast development are significant. Likewise, the interviewer’s score of a respondent’s development as compared to her peers is also not significant. The one pubertal development measure that is significant is how old a girl feels she looks as compared to other girls her age. I find that a 1-point increase in how a girl rates herself relative to others is associated with a 23% increase in her likelihood of dieting.

Model seven presents the final model predicting adolescent dieting. As shown, when controlling for race and body weight, girls who play sports are 15% less likely to diet for each additional sport they play. A 1-point increase in self-perceived development as compared to peers is associated with a 25% increase. In the full model, GPA does not significantly predict dieting.
Table 2.4: Logistic Odds Ratios Predicting Dieting at W3 – Student Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0.77 *</td>
<td>0.75 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-1.98)</td>
<td>(-2.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other race</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-0.72)</td>
<td>(-0.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.52)</td>
<td>(0.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
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<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.80)</td>
<td>(1.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI at W3</td>
<td>1.14 ***</td>
<td>1.14 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(10.26)</td>
<td>(9.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI change since W1</td>
<td>1.08 ***</td>
<td>1.08 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5.02)</td>
<td>(5.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College student at W3</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.24 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>(2.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated from college</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W3 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended college, did not</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>graduate W3 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>(-0.46)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Reference is women who never attended college

Predictors of Early Adult Dieting

Table 2.4 presents the results from logistic regression models predicting dieting at wave three focusing on the school environment variables. These models test hypothesis 3, that a woman’s likelihood of dieting is increased when she is in a peer-centered environment such as high school or college. Recall that I am not able to test the influence of being in high school on adolescent dieting because all respondents were in high school at wave one.

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2 Because the control variable for parental income was not significant at wave one, I exclude it from the wave three models. There is no theoretical reason to suspect that parental income could influence dieting in adulthood given that it was not important during adolescence.
However, I am able to test the significance of being in college. Model one shows the base model and indicates that, as expected, the most significant predictors of dieting are body weight and weight gain since high school.

Model 2 tests whether being in college is significantly related to dieting. The reference group in this model is women who never attended college. I find that women who are in college are 24% more likely to diet than those who never attended. Once a woman leaves college, whether through attrition or graduation, she is no more likely to diet than women who never attended. This provides support for hypothesis 3 suggesting that there is something specific to being in the college environment that increases dieting.
Table 2.5: Logistic Odds Ratios Predicting Dieting at W3 – Status Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-1.46)</td>
<td>(-1.76)</td>
<td>(-1.85)</td>
<td>(-1.72)</td>
<td>(-1.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other race</td>
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<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-0.72)</td>
<td>(-0.66)</td>
<td>(-0.68)</td>
<td>(-0.65)</td>
<td>(-0.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.598)</td>
<td>(0.44)</td>
<td>(0.31)</td>
<td>(0.41)</td>
<td>(0.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
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<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.39)</td>
<td>(1.66)</td>
<td>(1.73)</td>
<td>(1.59)</td>
<td>(1.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI at W3</td>
<td>1.13 ***</td>
<td>1.13 ***</td>
<td>1.13 ***</td>
<td>1.13 ***</td>
<td>1.13 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(9.65)</td>
<td>(9.69)</td>
<td>(9.71)</td>
<td>(9.63)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI change since W1</td>
<td>1.08 ***</td>
<td>1.08 ***</td>
<td>1.08 ***</td>
<td>1.08 ***</td>
<td>1.08 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5.00)</td>
<td>(4.79)</td>
<td>(5.02)</td>
<td>(4.93)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI at W1</td>
<td>1.12 ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(7.49)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of sports played in high school</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.91)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA in high school</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-0.88)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reported development in high school compared to peers</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.68)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent at W3</td>
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<td>1.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.99)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time worker at W3</td>
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<td>1.03</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married at W3</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>(-0.14)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 2.5 presents the results of logistic regression models predicting dieting at wave three focusing on status pathway variables. The first model presents the same predictors as the final model from Table 2.3 only this time used to predict dieting at wave three. The results demonstrate that the significant variables which predicted adolescent dieting do not
predict dieting later in life. Girls who played sports in high school, had higher GPAs, or who developed earlier than their peers were no more or less likely to diet in early adulthood. Likewise, the race effect is not seen at wave three; black women were not less likely to diet at this age in spite of the fact that they were previously less than half as likely to diet as their white peers. Body mass index does remain a significant predictor of dieting.

Model two presents the base model for dieting at wave three with only the control variables. At this point, only the variables relating to weight are predictive of dieting. The influence of weight on dieting remains similar to what it was at wave one; each one-point increase in BMI is associated with a 13% increase in a woman’s likelihood of dieting. The amount of weight gained since high school is also a significant predictor. For each BMI point gained since wave one, a woman’s likelihood of dieting increases 8%.

Models three through five test hypothesis 3, whether women who acquire potentially status-conferring roles during the transition to adulthood are less likely to diet. I find no support for this hypothesis. Neither parenthood, full-time employment, nor marriage significantly decreases a woman’s likelihood of dieting. I ran additional models testing for additive effects of accumulating multiple roles and testing for interaction effects from different role combinations; these were also not significant.

**Discussion**

In summary, I find mixed support for hypothesis 1. The degree to which a girl has matured since elementary school does not influence her likelihood of dieting. However, how she feels her overall development compares to her peers does predict dieting. Girls who feel that they look older than other girls their age are more likely to diet. Interestingly,

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3 Results not presented but available upon request from the author
this finding only holds with regards to self-perceived pubertal development. The variable for interviewer-rated development was not significant.

While these findings are insufficient to substantiate the hypothesis that adolescent dieting is predicted by pubertal development, they do suggest additional research. My findings suggest that what matters to adolescent girls is how they believe they compare to others and not how they compare to their past selves (self-reported developmental change) or how others actually see them (interviewer scored development). A direction for future study is to examine the direction of causality of this relationship. While my hypothesis in this study assumed that teenage girls diet partially as a reaction to physical development, it is possible that girls who diet are more likely to perceive themselves as being more developed than their peers because they are already more focused on their bodies.

Secondly, I likewise find mixed results when testing hypothesis 2. Girls who play sports are less likely to diet, even when controlling for body weight. However, girls who have high academic achievement are more likely to diet. Clearly academic achievement does not provide an alternative pathway to status for girls that reduces their likelihood of dieting. In fact, I find that girls with higher academic achievement may be more likely to diet.

One explanation for this may be found in past research on how the association between academics and popularity among girls changes during adolescence. A study of high school seniors in Michigan found that academic achievement was correlated with social status, but its effect on self-esteem depended on the nature and frequency of interactions with other students (Faunce 1984). Other studies have found that adolescent academic achievement is positively correlated with likability but negatively correlated with popularity, and that teenage girls themselves place less value on academic achievement than popularity (Eder 1985). On the other hand, more recent studies have indicated that academic
achievement does generate peer esteem among elementary school-aged girls (Adler, Kless, and Adler 1992). This suggests that girls with higher academic achievement may be liked by their peers, but by high school they no longer receive social status, peer esteem, or ego gratification as a result of their achievement. Girls with higher academic achievement may therefore diet as a pathway to status in high school because they no longer receive peer esteem based on their academic achievement.

An alternative potential explanation can be found drawing on previous research which has shown that talking about dieting and engaging in “fat talk” are important ways for teenage girls to show that they are similar to their peers and share common group values (Nichter 2000). In fact, girls who do not denigrate their weight or who do not express a desire to lose weight lose status in the eyes of their peers and risk social ostracism. It is possible is that academic achievement does provide a pathway to status, but that adolescent girls who gain status in this regard are more motivated to maintain their status and therefore more likely to report that they are dieting.

If this is the case, why do we not see the same phenomena with sports participation? In fact, sports participation significantly reduces a girl’s likelihood of dieting, and this effect is seen independent of weight. Girls who play sports do not diet less simply because they weigh less due to their increased physical activity; athletic girls who weigh more are less likely to diet than non-athletic girls of the same weight. In addition to providing a pathway to status and peer regard for young women, sports participation also likely exposes girls to an alternative cultural message about the body that at least values, if not emphasizes, performance over appearance.

Third, I do find strong support for hypothesis 3. Young women who are in college are more likely to diet than women who graduated from college, those who never attended,
and those who formerly attended but left without graduating. Because college closely resembles high school in terms of the social environment, college provides an extended adolescence for young women and lengthens the time during which dieting functions as a status-seeking or group acceptance behavior. This finding needs to be explored more fully in future research. One alternative explanation is that young women who are not in college are likely to be either working full-time or caring for a child, or both. These women likely have far less time to devote to focusing on weight-loss activities. Therefore dieting may be more difficult at the same time that it offers fewer social benefits.

Finally, I do not find support for hypothesis 4, the idea that accumulating pathways to status during early adulthood decreases dieting. Young women who accumulate status through role accumulation are not less likely to diet than their peers. Whether it is parenthood, marriage, or starting a career, these roles do not affect dieting. This is not to say that these roles do not confer status; there is a long tradition of research demonstrating the status benefits of these roles. Rather, dieting during adulthood is primarily predicted by weight and weight gain during the transition to adulthood.

Conclusion

This study points to two additional areas for further research. One area along these lines is to better examine how dieting as a behavior and a symbol is understood by black adolescents and young women. My research indicates that black adolescent girls are much less likely than their white peers to diet in high school. However, by early adulthood there was no difference between blacks and whites in their likelihood of dieting. Further studies are needed to better understand the relationship between dieting and status for black adolescents, if such a relationship exists, and how it changes during the transition to adulthood.
Secondly, it is unclear what exactly the adolescent girls in this study meant when they reported that they were “dieting”. Nichter's (2000) research found that while middle school girls talked a lot about dieting and even reported that they were dieting, they did not exhibit many behaviors that one would associate with dieting such as counting calories or monitoring food portions. It is obviously impossible to know whether the young women who participated in this study were actually dieting as opposed to talking about dieting. Further qualitative studies are needed to differentiate between dieting as behavior and dieting as symbolic rhetoric. Especially when considering the relationship between dieting and status, it will be useful to develop research that can differentiate between these two forms of dieting.

This study has presented a framework for understanding how dieting, as a social behavior, changes during the transition to adulthood. In doing so, I challenge the assumption that dieting is solely an instrumental behavior. I examine the implications of understanding dieting as a social, peer-oriented ritual among adolescent girls. This is important because, although dieting among adolescents is almost universally ill-advised and unhealthy, it persists as a commonly accepted behavior among girls and young women. By understanding which social factors both promote and discourage dieting, researchers can determine whether there are alternative ideologies to the thin ideal that can potentially influence young women to avoid unhealthy dieting behaviors.

I find that dieting is not reduced when girls have alternative pathways to status. Rather, dieting appears to be less likely when girls have alternative pathways to status that also provide them with an alternative to popular culture’s emphasis on the thin ideal. One such pathway is participation in sports, which provides girls with both a pathway to status and peer esteem as well as an ideal that emphasizes fitness and performance over thinness.
and aesthetics. This demonstrates that, while adolescent girls are clearly influenced by fat talk and the thin ideal, alternative ideologies may translate into observable reductions in unhealthy dieting.
REFERENCES


CHAPTER 3
A TEST OF THE INFLUENCE OF STRONG AND WEAK TIES ON ADOLESCENT WEIGHT PERCEPTION AND DIETING

High schools are the primary locations for adolescent socialization, and peers are the primary agents of socialization (Coleman 1961; Coleman 1965). In this research, I study the extent to which adolescents’ opinions about their weight and weight-related behaviors are related to how their peers view their own weight. I answer two questions: 1) are adolescents' weight beliefs and actions related to the weight beliefs of their peers; and, if so, 2) is the influence greater along strong or weak network ties? I study two important weight-related outcomes, the perception of being overweight and dieting, to evaluate the influence of strong and weak social ties. I consider three potential mechanisms of social network influence: social comparison, social interaction, and group norms.

Significance

A spate of recent research has highlighted the significant influence that social networks play in influencing individual behaviors and beliefs. Peer influence has been demonstrated to affect a variety of health-related outcomes including weight (Christakis and Fowler 2007), smoking (Christakis and Fowler 2008), and even cognitive functioning (Fratiglioni et al. 2000). However, these studies do not differentiate between types of social network ties. In essence, one's social network is broadly defined to include “everyone you know”. This study offers an important contribution by distinguishing between strong and weak ties, qualitatively different types of social network connections. By separately
evaluating the influence of friends versus acquaintances, I offer new insight on how weight-related beliefs and actions are transmitted within social networks.

Prior studies have also focused almost exclusively on behavioral outcomes without exploring how these are related to beliefs or opinions. For example, in Christakis' (2008) recent study on smoking it is not clear whether people whose friends quit smoking are more likely to quit themselves because they adopt the belief that smoking is unhealthy or for social desirability reasons. To gain traction on this question, I measure both belief and behavior – whether people think they are overweight and whether they are dieting. In doing so, I draw conclusions about the social psychological mechanisms of social network influence.

Background

Self-perception of weight appropriateness has been linked with a variety of mental health outcomes, particularly among adolescents. People who are unhappy with their weight are more likely to experience lower self-esteem (Davison and McCabe 2005) and depression (Ge et al. 2001). Among adolescents, body dissatisfaction is also associated with risk behaviors such as substance abuse, more frequent alcohol use, and more alcohol consumption (Page, Scanlan, and Allen 1995). These effects are not entirely related to actually being overweight. One recent study found that perception of being overweight is related to depression among adolescents, but BMI is not (Daniels 2005). This suggests that believing oneself to be overweight, regardless of whether one is overweight, is independently consequential for adolescent well-being.

In fact, there is evidence to suggest that being overweight only decreases self-esteem among adolescents who are personally dissatisfied with their appearance. Adolescents who are seen as deviant experience lowered self-esteem only when they feel that the societal view of their group is similar to them, and they negatively value the deviant label (Stager, Chassin,
and Young 1983). By this logic, overweight adolescents would have lower self-esteem only if they internalized a negative view of being overweight. Furthermore, Mendelson et al (1996) found that the relationship between self-esteem and body weight was fully explained by the inclusion of a measure of feelings about appearance.

Given the established relationship between body dissatisfaction and adolescent self-esteem, it is important to understand what factors influence the development of body dissatisfaction. Evidence suggests that individuals sometimes adopt the emotions or judgments of those around them, a process known as emotional contagion (Barsade 2002; Doherty 1998). In service encounters, for example, customers tend to “catch” the emotions displayed by employees and report similar feelings about the service encounters during which they interacted (Pugh 2001).

In this paper, I evaluate whether adolescents’ perceptions about their weight and actions to control weight are subject to contagion effects. I examine whether the self-perceptions of one’s friends and acquaintances influence one’s own self-perception of weight or dieting behavior. I discuss three possible mechanisms through which social networks may influence self-perceptions.

**Mechanisms of Peer Influence**

There are three possible ways in which social contagion of weight beliefs may occur among adolescent social networks. First, adolescents may compare themselves to others in order to form an opinion about whether they are overweight or not. Morrison et al. (2004) found that the extent to which adolescents compared themselves unfavorably to others regarding appearance predicted self-esteem, dieting behavior, pathogenic weight control practices, and body dissatisfaction. If perception of being overweight is related to comparing one’s self to others, it is likely that adolescents would be influenced by both the
appearance and self-perceptions of their peers. An adolescent may compare how they see themselves with how others see themselves and mimic the attitudes of others in their social network - “The people I know all think they are overweight so I must be too” (Jones 2001). This is the social comparison mechanism. By this reasoning, adolescents would be influenced by both their friends and their non-friend peers with whom they interact. Both strong and weak network ties would influence weight beliefs.

Second, it has been shown that appearance conversations with friends and criticism from friends are related to body dissatisfaction for adolescents (Jones, Vigfusdottir, and Lee 2004). It is not necessary for appearance conversations to be critical; adolescents who talk about weight and appearance in general with their friends are likely to experience lower body satisfaction because weight is a salient characteristic within the group. Hearing and participating in discussions about dieting, weight, and body dissatisfaction increases the degree to which young women internalize negative opinions of their weight (Nichter 2000). This is the social interaction mechanism of peer influence. The social comparison mechanism posits that negative weight beliefs of an individual are associated with negative beliefs of those with whom they are connected, and positive beliefs of the individual would be related to positive beliefs within the social network. However, the social interaction mechanism holds that any type of weight-related interactions can increase negative weight beliefs by increasing the salience and importance of weight within the social network. This mechanism specifically explains the transmission of weight beliefs along strong network ties because people interact more frequently with their friends than with their weakly-tied peers.

Third, adolescents may be influenced by the group norms of their wider peer groups or schools. Loland (1999) found that athletes varied in how satisfied they were with their bodies depending on what sport they played. Sports that are more oriented towards
appearance (bodybuilding, gymnastics) had higher rates of body dissatisfaction that functional sports like soccer or skiing because the appearance-oriented sports players shared group norms that emphasized weight and appearance. A similar study looking at high-school cheerleaders found that cheerleaders have more eating disorders, dieting behavior, and body dissatisfaction than comparable-weight non-cheerleaders (Thompson and Digsby 2004). These studies provide evidence for the group norms mechanism of peer influence and can explain how weight beliefs and behaviors are passed along weak ties in social networks. For example, young men who are members of the wrestling team may be more likely to feel that they are overweight not because they discuss weight with their friends or even know what their friends think about weight, but because they share a common group norm of being concerned about weight because they are wrestlers. Likewise, observing those around you dieting may increase your likelihood of dieting because it is seen as a common group norm. If body dissatisfaction among adolescents is related to group norms and expectations, than adolescents would be influenced by the self-perceptions of others who share a common group identity, even if they do not interact frequently with any particular individual in the group. It is the shared group identity that is the vector for the transmission of weight beliefs, so weak ties are a pathway for such transmission.

**Theoretical Framework**

In this study, I measure the influence of friends and non-friend peers on self-perception of being overweight and dieting. By testing whether adolescent weight beliefs are related to strong or weak network ties, or both, I test the three mechanisms of peer influence on weight beliefs and behaviors outlined above: social comparison, social interaction, and group norms. It is important to note that these mechanisms are not exclusive and there may be multiple pathways of influence operating within a social network. For each subject, I
identify two types of social connections. Strong ties are connections with others whom the subject identifies as being friends. Weak ties are connections with others who participate in some school-based activity with the subject, such as a sports team or an academic club. This captures the effects of group norms within the subject's social groupings.

I first consider whether strong ties have an influence on a subject’s weight perception or dieting. If so, it will support the mechanism that weight beliefs and/or behaviors are transmitted via social comparison and social interaction. I then consider whether weak ties established through school social groupings affect weight outcomes. If this is substantiated, it will lend support to the social comparison and group norms mechanisms. However, if neither type of social network tie is important than it suggests that social network influence acts through some alternative mechanism such as social desirability.

There is one important limitation worth noting. My study does not measure the actual amount of contact that respondents have with their friends or acquaintances. The amount of exposure an adolescent has to messages and images about body image has been shown to influence the extent to which they internalize such messages (Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn 2004; Field et al. 1999; Harrison and Fredrickson 2003; Harrison 2000; Stice, Spangler, and Agras 2001). It is reasonable to assume that the amount of contact between weak tie connections varies depending on the group; people on the same sports team may spend more time together than people in the same school club. If friends and/or acquaintances are shown to influence weight beliefs or actions, it should be stipulated that the amount of contact with these social network connections is not known.

**Data and Measures**

I test the influence of strong and weak ties on weight outcomes using data collected for the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally
Because this is a cross-sectional analysis rather than longitudinal, I acknowledge the possible reciprocal nature of the relationships I am examining. I hypothesize that adolescent weight outcomes are related to the beliefs of others with whom they have strong and weak ties. However, it is not possible to determine whether people select friends and group memberships based on their existing beliefs and behaviors, or whether they develop beliefs or behaviors based on their friendships and group memberships. In this study, I explore only whether weight outcomes are similar across strong and/or weak network ties. The question of which comes first: the outcome or the network connection, is beyond the scope of this study.

**Dependent Variables**

I develop a series of parallel models predicting two related dependent variables. For each subject, I measure whether they believe they are overweight, and whether they are dieting. To measure whether a subject thinks they are overweight, I use responses to the question, “How do you think of yourself in terms of weight?” The possible response categories were: very underweight, slightly underweight, about the right weight, slightly
overweight, and very overweight. I collapse response categories so that respondents who felt they were either “very overweight” or “slightly overweight” are coded as believing they were overweight, while all others are coded as not believing they were overweight.

I measure dieting as a subject’s response to the question, “During the past seven days, which of the following things did you do in order to lose weight or to keep from gaining weight: dieted?” Those who answered affirmatively are coded 1, and all others are coded 0.

Independent Variables

To measure the influence of strong ties, I include a variable measuring the percent of each person’s friends who think they are overweight and who are dieting. I also include a control variable indicating the number of friends each student nominated. Students had the opportunity to nominate up to ten friends on the survey.

I construct a similar measure for weak ties. A student's weak ties include all the members of each school-based group, club, or team in which they participate. These group memberships are taken from the in-school survey. Students could indicate whether they participated in any of the following: French club, Spanish club, Latin club, German club, book club, debate team, computer club, Drama club, Future Farmers of America (FFA), history club, math club, science club, band, cheerleading/dance team, chorus/choir, orchestra, other club, baseball/softball, basketball, field hockey, football, ice hockey, soccer, swimming, tennis, track, volleyball, wrestling, other sport, newspaper, honor society, student council, or yearbook. I drop the categories “other club” and “other sport” because it is impossible to determine if students who select those answers were in the same other activity as other students in their school who selected the same answer.
For each group, I create variables indicating the number of group members, the number of members who think they are overweight, and the number who are dieting. For each student, I add together the total number of people with whom they share group membership and the number of those people who are coded positive for each weight outcome. This results in an overall variable for each student indicating the percent of their weak tie associations who either identify as overweight or who are dieting. Students who belong to no groups have a zero value for this variable.

In all models, I include relevant socio-demographic control variables. I control for BMI since that is clearly an important predictor of both weight perception and dieting. Other studies have indicated that overweight and non-overweight people evaluate their appearance differently (Hendry and Gillies 1978; Joanisse 2004; Wills et al. 2006/1). I calculate BMI based on self-reported height and weight and include this as a continuous variable.

While measured weight is more accurate than self-reported weight, only self-reported weight is available in the data set for wave one. There are some known biases in self-reported weight. Women, minorities, and low-income people are more likely to mis-report their weight (Chang and Christakis 2005; Chang and Christakis 2003). However, because the dependent variables in this study are weight-related beliefs and attitudes, it is sufficient to control for weight by measuring what people think they weigh.

I also control for race, age, and social class. For race, I use dummy variables for white, black, and other race. The reference category in all models is white. I control for age by using a continuous variable for grade in school which ranges from 7 to 12. I control for socio-economic status by including two variables, one for the highest level of education received by either parent and another for household income. These variables are both taken
from the wave one parent survey. Parent’s level of education is measured through a series of
dummy variables indicating: high school graduate or less, some college, 2-year college degree,
4-year college degree, or graduate/professional degree. The reference category is 4-year
college degree. Household income is measured as the value people reported when asked,
“About how much total income before taxes did your family receive in 1994? Include your
own income, the income of everyone else in the household, and income from welfare
benefits, dividends, and all other sources.” This is a continuous variable measured in
$1000s.

**Analytic Models**

I conduct analysis using binary logistic regression models where the outcome is
whether a subject either reports they are overweight or reports they are dieting. I run
separate models by gender to evaluate whether social network processes operate differently
for men and women. I also ran models (not presented) on the full sample using interaction
terms for gender and strong/weak ties and these were not significant. For these models, let
the subject = j, each of his/her friends = i_{i=n}, and the acquaintance group = g. Whether
one has a particular trait, in this case either believing she is overweight or being dissatisfied
with his/her body, is represented as k. N_i is the total number of friends i reported by
subject j. Therefore:

\[ X_{jk} = 1 \text{ if person j says (s)he has trait k, 0 if j~k} \]
\[ X_{ijk} = \text{the proportion of N friends who have trait k} \]
\[ Q_{gjk} = \text{the proportion of acquaintances in group g who have trait k} \]

The generalized logistic model then predicting the odds of a given respondent either
identifying as overweight or dieting is then:
\[
\ln(\Pr(X_{jk} = 1) / \Pr(X_{jk} = 0)) = c + Q_{gjk} + X_{ijk} + b_{1...n} X_{1...n} + e
\]

**Results**

Descriptive statistics for all the variables in my analysis are presented in Table 3.1. Around 30% of teenagers in the study felt that they were overweight, although the mean body mass index was 22.27 which is squarely within the “normal weight” category. Thirteen percent of respondents were actively dieting at the time of the survey. One point to note is that 35% of the sample is classified as “other race”. This is because all adolescents who do not explicitly as white or black are considered “other race”. This therefore includes students who identified as multi-racial. The reason for this is that significant differences in body image and dieting have been shown to primarily exist between white and black adolescents, so it is efficient only to single out these racial groups for control variables.
Table 3.1: Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Boys Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Girls Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sees self as overweight</td>
<td>20.07%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>37.28%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% friends see selves as overweight</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>32.33%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% weak ties see selves as overweight</td>
<td>25.96%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>30.38%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dieting</td>
<td>5.21%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>20.49%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% friends dieting</td>
<td>10.00%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>16.37%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% weak ties dieting</td>
<td>12.13%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>16.00%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of friends</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of weak ties</td>
<td>244.58</td>
<td>329.26</td>
<td></td>
<td>247.01</td>
<td>336.23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI</td>
<td>22.77</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td></td>
<td>21.83</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>67.45%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>63.55%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>12.48%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14.60%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other race</td>
<td>20.07%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21.85%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade in school</td>
<td>9.96</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td></td>
<td>9.89</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents HS degree or less</td>
<td>22.48%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21.04%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents some college</td>
<td>21.21%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>18.34%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents college degree</td>
<td>47.06%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>49.99%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents advanced/graduate degree</td>
<td>9.24%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10.63%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental income</td>
<td>47.62</td>
<td>35.03</td>
<td></td>
<td>46.7163</td>
<td>40.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weight Self-Perception

Table 3.2 presents results from logistic regression models predicting the odds of self-identifying as being overweight. Model 1 predicts the influence of the self-perceptions of one's friends on one's own perception of being overweight or not. I find that neither the number of friends nor the self-perceptions of those friends has a significant influence on an individual's perception of overweight. This finding holds for both boys and girls. As expected, Body Mass Index has a significant effect. Each 1-point increase in BMI is associated with a 79% increase in one's likelihood of dieting. This is the same for both boys
and girls. The most notable gender difference in Model 1 is that black males are only 15% as likely to diet as white males, controlling for BMI. However, there are no significant differences between black and white adolescent girls.

Table 3.2: Logistic Odds Ratios Predicting Seeing Self as Overweight

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1 Boys</th>
<th>Model 1 Girls</th>
<th>Model 2 Boys</th>
<th>Model 2 Girls</th>
<th>Model 3 Boys</th>
<th>Model 3 Girls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% friends see selves as overweight</td>
<td>0.69 (0.65)</td>
<td>1.35 (0.78)</td>
<td>0.72 (-0.46)</td>
<td>1.43 (0.95)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of friends</td>
<td>1.00 0.87</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.29 ** 0.83 *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% weak ties see selves as overweight</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.025 (1.60)</td>
<td>1.00 (0.56)</td>
<td>1.00 (0.97)</td>
<td>1.00 (0.64)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of weak ties</td>
<td>(-0.05) (-1.20)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(2.65) (-1.72)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI</td>
<td>1.79*** (8.23)</td>
<td>1.79*** (8.55)</td>
<td>1.75*** (8.99)</td>
<td>1.78*** (6.67)</td>
<td>1.99*** (9.30)</td>
<td>1.86*** (7.43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black 1</td>
<td>0.15*** (-3.17)</td>
<td>0.88 (-0.29)</td>
<td>0.28 ** (-2.59)</td>
<td>0.73 (-0.84)</td>
<td>0.13*** (-3.15)</td>
<td>1.17 (0.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other race 1</td>
<td>1.09 (0.16)</td>
<td>0.82 (-0.51)</td>
<td>0.89 (-0.22)</td>
<td>1.00 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.75 (-0.43)</td>
<td>1.26 (0.55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade in school</td>
<td>0.76 (-1.42)</td>
<td>0.94 (-0.68)</td>
<td>0.79 (-1.55)</td>
<td>0.91 (-0.99)</td>
<td>0.75 (-1.61)</td>
<td>0.94 (-0.62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents HS degree or less 2</td>
<td>1.62 (0.70)</td>
<td>0.85 (-0.33)</td>
<td>0.79 (-0.34)</td>
<td>0.86 (-0.33)</td>
<td>0.78 (-0.31)</td>
<td>1.16 (0.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents some college 2</td>
<td>1.59 (0.91)</td>
<td>0.59 (-1.31)</td>
<td>1.31 (0.56)</td>
<td>0.63 (-1.04)</td>
<td>1.53 (0.77)</td>
<td>0.59 (-1.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents advanced degree 2</td>
<td>0.88 (-0.22)</td>
<td>1.06 (0.08)</td>
<td>1.08 (0.16)</td>
<td>1.07 (0.12)</td>
<td>0.56 (-0.92)</td>
<td>1.06 (0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental income</td>
<td>1.00 (0.11)</td>
<td>1.00 (1.23)</td>
<td>1.00 (0.17)</td>
<td>1.01 (1.38)</td>
<td>1.00 (-0.05)</td>
<td>1.01 (1.26)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Reference group is white; 2 Reference group is Parents college degree
t-statistics in parentheses
Model 2 in Table 3.2 examines the influence of the self-perceptions of one's weak ties on one's own perception of overweight. In this model, there is a gender difference between the boys and girls in the study. For each additional weak tie a boy has, he is 1% less likely to see himself as overweight. While this appears to be a small effect, the mean number of weak tie associations is around 245 for both boys and girls so the additive effect of weak ties on perception of overweight is more substantial than it appears. As with Model 1, there is a significant relationship between BMI and perception of overweight with similar effects seen for both boys and girls. The relationship between race and self-perception of weight status is again present only among the male sample of students.

Model three includes measures for both a respondent's friends and acquaintances – strong and weak ties. Interestingly, the measure of the number of friends one reports becomes significant in the model when included in conjunction with the number of weak ties. The effect that one's number of friends has on one's self-perception of weight status varies by gender. Each additional friend that a boy reports increases his likelihood of seeing himself as overweight by 29%, while each additional friend that a girl has reduces her likelihood by 17%. All the other variables in Model 3 are consistent across models.
Table 3.3: Logistic Odds Ratios Predicting Dieting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% friends dieting</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>0.91 **</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-(1.46)</td>
<td>(0.86)</td>
<td>-(2.50)</td>
<td>-(0.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of friends</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>1.33 **</td>
<td>0.81 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.51)</td>
<td>-(1.26)</td>
<td>(2.60)</td>
<td>-(2.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% weak ties dieting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.03 ***</td>
<td>1.04 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of weak ties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.03)</td>
<td>(1.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.78)</td>
<td>(1.55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(3.32)</td>
<td>(2.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.55)</td>
<td>(1.55)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(2.76)</td>
<td>(2.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI</td>
<td>1.16 ***</td>
<td>1.16 ***</td>
<td>1.21 ***</td>
<td>1.17 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.95)</td>
<td>(3.86)</td>
<td>(3.42)</td>
<td>(4.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.95)</td>
<td>(3.86)</td>
<td>(3.42)</td>
<td>(4.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.86)</td>
<td>(4.26)</td>
<td>(4.26)</td>
<td>(4.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.86)</td>
<td>(4.26)</td>
<td>(4.26)</td>
<td>(4.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black 1</td>
<td>-a-</td>
<td>0.40 ***</td>
<td>-a-</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-(2.00)</td>
<td>(0.79)</td>
<td>-(2.00)</td>
<td>(0.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-(2.00)</td>
<td>(0.79)</td>
<td>-(2.00)</td>
<td>(0.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.79)</td>
<td>-(2.00)</td>
<td>(0.79)</td>
<td>-(2.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other race 1</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-(0.22)</td>
<td>-(0.03)</td>
<td>-(0.43)</td>
<td>-(0.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-(0.22)</td>
<td>-(0.03)</td>
<td>-(0.43)</td>
<td>-(0.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-(0.22)</td>
<td>-(0.03)</td>
<td>-(0.43)</td>
<td>-(0.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade in school</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.49)</td>
<td>(1.85)</td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
<td>(0.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.49)</td>
<td>(1.85)</td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
<td>(0.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.49)</td>
<td>(1.85)</td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
<td>(0.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents HS degree or less 2</td>
<td>4.73 *</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>1.76</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(2.10)</td>
<td>(1.59)</td>
<td>(1.34)</td>
<td>(1.54)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.10)</td>
<td>(1.59)</td>
<td>(1.34)</td>
<td>(1.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.10)</td>
<td>(1.59)</td>
<td>(1.34)</td>
<td>(1.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents some college 2</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.20)</td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
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<td>-(0.54)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(1.20)</td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
<td>-(0.64)</td>
<td>-(0.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.20)</td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
<td>-(0.64)</td>
<td>-(0.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents advanced degree 2</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>2.78 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(1.90)</td>
<td>-(1.52)</td>
<td>(2.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(1.90)</td>
<td>-(1.52)</td>
<td>(2.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(1.90)</td>
<td>-(1.52)</td>
<td>(2.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental income</td>
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<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-(1.34)</td>
<td>-(0.81)</td>
<td>-(0.04)</td>
<td>-(0.41)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-(1.34)</td>
<td>-(0.81)</td>
<td>-(0.04)</td>
<td>-(0.41)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-(1.34)</td>
<td>-(0.81)</td>
<td>-(0.04)</td>
<td>-(0.41)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

-a- there are too few black male respondents who were dieting to estimate an odds ratio

1 Reference group is white; 2 Reference group is Parents college degree

-Statistics in parentheses

Dieting

Table 3.3 presents results from the same set of logistic regression models only this time predicting dieting. Model 1 tests whether adolescents who have more dieting friends are more likely to diet themselves. I find this is not the case; there is no significant association between individual dieting and the dieting patterns of one's friends. There are a
couple points to note about this model. First, I do not report an odds ratio for black males. This is because there is too little variation to analyze this variable within the male sub-sample; black male adolescents are generally not dieting. Second, while BMI score does significantly predict dieting, the effect size is much smaller than in the models from Table 2. A one-point increase in BMI score increases one's likelihood of dieting by 15%, compared to increasing one's likelihood of identifying as overweight by 75%. This indicates that body weight does not affect weight-related behaviors as much as it affects weight-related beliefs.

Model 2 tests the influence of one's weak ties on dieting, and there are significant gender differences here. Among girls, a 1% increase in the percentages of one's weak ties who are dieting is associated with a 3% increase in one's likelihood of dieting. There is no such effect among the boys in the study. There is, however, a relationship between the size of one's weak tie social network and dieting. Both boys and girls have a 1% decrease in their likelihood of dieting for each additional weak tie in their network. This is similar to the effect found among the boys when looking at perceptions of overweight.

Model 3 includes measures of both strong and weak ties. Looking first at dieting behavior with one's social network, there are very different patterns among boys and girls. For boys, their likelihood of dieting decreases as the percent of their strong ties (friends) dieting increases. For girls, their likelihood of dieting increases as the percent of their weak ties dieting increases. Looking at social network size, the results also show notable gender differences. Both boys and girls are both less likely to diet as their number of weak tie acquaintances increases. However, girls with more friends are less likely to diet while boys with more friends are more likely to diet

*Interaction Effects*
Table 3.4 presents logistic odds ratios from models predicting dieting and perception of overweight using the full sample and including an interaction term to test the significance of gender. I run terms interacting gender with the respondent number of friends and acquaintances. I also include an interaction between gender and the % of friends/acquaintances who either think they are overweight or who are dieting. Models 1 and 3 are the base models, and models 2 and 4 are the interaction models.

When looking at perceptions of being overweight, there is a significant effect when looking at the interaction between gender and the number of friends and acquaintances. Each additional friend increases a man’s likelihood of dieting by 62%. I find the same effect when looking at dieting; each friend increases a man’s likelihood of dieting by 76%. On the other hand, a man’s likelihood of dieting declines as the percent of his friends who are dieting increases. As in the previous models, there is a small yet significant effect of the number of weak ties a man has on both perception of overweight and dieting. Each additional weak tie decreases both one’s likelihood of identifying as overweight and of dieting by 1%. These findings are all consistent with previous models and demonstrate that social network influences on weight beliefs and behaviors meaningfully differ by gender.
### Table 3.4: Logistic Odds Ratios Predicting Perception of Overweight and Dieting with Interaction Terms, Full Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overweight</td>
<td>Dieting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0.14 ***</td>
<td>0.11 ***</td>
<td>0.14 ***</td>
<td>0.13 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-4.79)</td>
<td>(-3.51)</td>
<td>(-4.05)</td>
<td>(-2.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% friends see selves as overweight</td>
<td>1.08 (0.24)</td>
<td>1.34 (0.86)</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(-0.97)</td>
<td>(-0.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% friends dieting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.04 **</td>
<td>1.04 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(2.72)</td>
<td>(2.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of friends</td>
<td>0.92 (-1.18)</td>
<td>0.81 (-1.74)</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.81 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.53)</td>
<td>(-2.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% weak ties see selves as overweight</td>
<td>1.00 (0.52)</td>
<td>0.99 (-0.67)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% weak ties dieting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.04 **</td>
<td>1.04 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(2.72)</td>
<td>(2.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of weak ties</td>
<td>0.99 (-0.41)</td>
<td>1.00 (1.48)</td>
<td>1.01 *</td>
<td>1.01 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(2.03)</td>
<td>(3.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male * % friends see as overweight</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(-0.46)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male * % friends dieting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.94 *</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(-2.44)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male * N of friends</td>
<td>1.62 *</td>
<td>1.76 **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.31)</td>
<td>(3.23)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male * % weak ties see as overweight</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.68)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.56)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male * % weak ties dieting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.99 ***</td>
<td>0.99 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-4.19)</td>
<td>(-5.00)</td>
<td>(-4.19)</td>
<td>(-5.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI</td>
<td>1.75 ***</td>
<td>1.89 ***</td>
<td>1.14 ***</td>
<td>1.18 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9.26)</td>
<td>(11.34)</td>
<td>(3.96)</td>
<td>(4.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black 1</td>
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<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-0.90)</td>
<td>(-1.12)</td>
<td>(-1.41)</td>
<td>(-1.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other race 1</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.32)</td>
<td>(0.35)</td>
<td>(-0.72)</td>
<td>(-0.71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade in school</td>
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<td>0.89</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-0.99)</td>
<td>(-1.18)</td>
<td>(0.57)</td>
<td>(0.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents HS degree or less 2</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>2.53 *</td>
<td>1.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.69)</td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
<td>(2.04)</td>
<td>(1.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents some college 2</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-0.51)</td>
<td>(-0.65)</td>
<td>(-0.66)</td>
<td>(-0.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents advanced degree 2</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>2.75 *</td>
<td>2.51 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>(-0.11)</td>
<td>(2.22)</td>
<td>(2.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Reference group is white; 2 Reference group is Parents college degree
t-statistics in parentheses
Discussion

The objective of this research was to determine the influence of strong and weak network ties on adolescent weight beliefs and behaviors. I focused specifically on self-perception of being overweight and dieting, two related yet distinct outcomes. I find that adolescent weight self-evaluation is primarily related to body weight, but social network influences remain even when controlling for body mass index. When looking at perceptions of overweight, it is the size of an adolescent's social network that matters and not the weight beliefs of those in one's network. Boys who have more weak ties in their networks are less likely to diet, while a girl's risk of dieting decreases as the number of strong ties in her network increases. In fact, a boy's risk of dieting actually increases as his number of friends increases.

These findings suggest a couple points. First, it is unlikely that self-perceptions of overweight are subject to social contagion effects. Whether or not adolescents identify as overweight is not a function of whether those around them also identify as overweight. This is likely because BMI is such a strong predictor of weight, and past studies have documented that people who are overweight are more likely to be friends with others who are also overweight. Therefore it is not surprising that, in models which control for weight, there is no independent effect of social network attitudes on perception of overweight.

On the other hand, there is a significant relationship between social network size and self-perception of overweight. Why does it matter how many strong and weak ties an adolescent has? Recall that girls with more friends are less likely to see themselves as overweight, as are boys with more weak ties. This is evidence to support the theoretical link between body weight and social status or peer esteem. One of the primary avenues to popularity and social status in high school for girls is appearance. Thinner girls have more
friends and are more popular among their peers (Carr and Friedman 2005; McCabe, Ricciardelli, and Finemore 2002). Also, studies have found that being overweight is more associated with lower self-esteem among adolescents who feel stigmatized as a result of their weight (Daniels 2005). Taken together, this suggests perhaps a reverse causality process. Adolescents who identify as overweight may do so because they have fewer friends and smaller social networks – those same adolescents might not identify as overweight if they had larger social networks or were more popular among their peers.

Turning to dieting, however, I find that the behaviors of those in an adolescent's social network do matter. As dieting increases among a boy's friend group (strong ties), he own likelihood of dieting decreases. As dieting increases among a girl's weak ties, however, her likelihood of dieting increases. This evidence supports the theory that dieting as a social behavior means something different for teenage girls than for boys.

Dieting, unlike self-perception of weight, is a visible behavioral symbol. Especially in middle and high school, dieting is something done in public and shared with those around. For girls, dieting and talking about dieting is a way to fit in with peers and demonstrate a female gender identity. Whether it represents a personal desire to lose weight or not, dieting signals to others in the group that a girl values thinness. The more people in one's social network who are dieting, the more likely a young woman is to adopt the behavior. While “fat talk” may work with friends, it is less likely that teens have the same opportunity to engage is such conversations with mere acquaintances. Therefore, among weak ties, dieting is a way to symbolically say “I'm too fat” without having to say anything at all. This supports the social comparison and group norms mechanisms; young people are more likely to diet when they see others around them dieting. Dieting is a way for girls to fit in and symbolically demonstrate group appearance norms.
Equally important is the fact that boys have little to gain socially by dieting. Fat talk is not a part of the social routine for teenage boys. If anything, boys would be more likely to engage in muscle-building activities as a way to express shared group values and gender norms. In fact, I find that boys are less likely to diet as the percentage of people in their social networks (strong and weak ties) who are dieting increases. One explanation for this lies in the fact that boys are much less likely to be dieting overall, and most boys who diet are overweight which is not the case among girls. Boys may compare themselves to their peers, just as girls do, but conclude that their dieting peers weigh more than they do and therefore they elect not to diet. Because dieting serves primarily an instrumental and not a social function for boys, the relationship between dieting and social network looks different for boys than for girls.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to note. First of all, there are far fewer young people dieting than young people who say they are overweight. Almost 28% of those who are dieting do not say they are overweight, while 23% who think they are overweight are not dieting. This is consistent with Nichter's (2000) finding that many adolescents talk about dieting without actually dieting. The flip side is that, according to my research, a similar number of young people claim to be dieting in spite of believing they are not overweight. Therefore it is not clear whether the young people (particularly girls) in this study were actually dieting or whether they were claiming to be dieting for social desirability reasons.

Second, I do not include measures of the types and frequencies of interactions these young people have with their friends and acquaintances. While it is reasonable to assume that adolescents interact with their friends more frequently than their casual acquaintances, I am not able to quantify these interactions. Along similar lines, I do not have information on
how active respondents are within the groups, clubs, and teams in which they participate. Further research is needed to explore whether the duration, frequency, and content of peer interactions has an influence on an adolescent's weight beliefs and actions.

**Conclusion**

My research answers a fundamental question about the relationship between weight-related outcomes and adolescent social networks, and opens the door for further research in this area. It is important to recognize that weight beliefs and weight behaviors are distinct outcomes, and only dieting is shown in this research to be patterned within social networks while both dieting and perceptions of overweight are related to network size. While the self-perceptions of those in one's social network, strong or weak ties, do not influence one's own self-perception of weight, it is not clear what does. I hypothesize that one important factor to consider is whether an adolescent has an alternative cultural ideology to draw on when forming his/her self-perception. Young people who have an alternative ideology to the culture of thinness may have a much easier time rejecting it than those who lack a cohesive alternative.

Another consideration which was not evaluated in this research is the degree to which media exposure influences self-perception. Exposure to sexual media content is related to the initiation of adolescent sexual activity (L'Engle, Brown, and Kennealy 2006), so it is possible that a similar pattern may exist when considering the onset of body dissatisfaction. Further research, particularly qualitative studies of cultural appearance norms and ideologies, are needed to elaborate this point.

Recent studies have highlighted the important role that social networks play in the adoption of a wide range of health-related behaviors and beliefs. This study decomposes that relationship to consider independently the effect of strong ties (friends) and weak ties
(acquaintances). By differentiating between these two, I present evidence to support the theory that dieting among adolescents can best be understood as a symbolic behavior, strongly linked to gender norms, which can function as a sign of shared group values and norms. This not only sheds light on why adolescents diet, but also presents a framework for further research exploring how and why social networks influence individual outcomes. By exploring not only whether social networks matter, but specifically how and why they matter, we can gain traction on the classic sociological question of how overarching cultural norms and values are reproduced in individual behaviors and beliefs.
REFERENCES


