

Effects of Social Class and Body Image on Self-Esteem

Amanda Caposella

Western Connecticut State University

Do the images people are exposed to on a daily basis from magazine ads to billboards affect women's self-esteem? Forty undergraduate students viewed images of women in different professions and of different body types to test the theory. According to past research all these perfect images people are exposed to on a daily basis are having a lasting effect on their perceptions of themselves. This researcher wanted to know if exposure to these images would lower women's self-esteem. Results indicated that neither the different conditions (model images versus average body type images) nor the type of profession (lower or higher class occupations) produced any significant differences. Further research is needed to clarify factors related to women's low self-esteem.

Over the past fifteen to twenty years, eating disorders (specifically anorexia and bulimia) have begun to be acknowledged as serious problems. The media has told the world about the deaths of well-known performers and athletes who have died as a direct result of their eating disorders and the negative effects of low self-esteem and depression. Audiences receive mixed messages from the media in that people may read an article about someone suffering or dying from anorexia on one page, and have a clothing ad with a clearly underweight model on the next page. People of higher status are recognized more in advertisements, showing off all the money and material goods they have, while advertising expensive products encouraging people to buy these pricy items and be happy and wealthy just like them. According to William Thompson, author of *Society in Focus* (2005), examining the effects of social class systems is imperative and helps better understand our society and the people.

In many television advertisements, thin and "beautiful" models grace the screen and sell beauty products. In these commercials beauty is being associated with being thin and flawless. These ads portray women who have a weight that is way below average, and who have no imperfections. It is virtually impossible to attain this look, and the women watching these ads at home do not always realize that. Yet it is also almost impossible to avoid these advertisements, unless you commit yourself to a television free life, but even then there are billboards, magazine ads, and even

newspapers. Psychologists have become increasingly interested in body dissatisfaction, in part because body dissatisfaction puts women's health at risk; body dissatisfaction has adverse psychological consequences including disordered eating (Thompson et al, 1999) and depression (F. Johnson & Wardle, 2005). Research has demonstrated that starting in adolescence, girls are responding to weight concerns by extreme caloric restrictions and severe weight control efforts such as purging (Stice, Killen, Hayward & Taylor, 1998). Such extreme efforts may be attempted because maintaining the desirably low body weight is biologically difficult. Body dissatisfaction has also been hypothesized to contribute to the emergence of the gender disparity in depression. Indeed, a growing body of empirical work has documented that body dissatisfaction prospectively predicts girls' and women's depression (Rierdan, Koff, & Stubbs, 1989). Body image dissatisfaction creates risk for mental health concerns that disproportionately affect women. "Women experience higher levels of depression than men in a ratio 2:1 and eating disorders in the ratio 9:1" (Thompson et al., 1999). Therefore it is not only women who are affected by advertisements but men are also affected by a pressure to be more masculine and toned.

There has been a lot of research done about the changes our society has been undergoing in the last two decades about how the media is having a large impact on both men and women's self-esteem, how these factors could contribute to an increase in body distortions and the pressure to have the perfect body can have negative consequences on people's self-esteem. The current study proposed to test the effects of social class systems and body image on one's self-esteem. The images used helped to determine if people are more self-conscious and would rate themselves lower on their own self-esteem, depending upon if they see a

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Amanda Caposella, Department of Psychology, Western Connecticut State University, 181 White Street, Danbury, CT 06810. Email: caposella002@wcsu.edu. This research was conducted under the supervision of Daniel W. Barrett, Ph.D.

person in a lower or higher socioeconomic class and if the image of that person is presented as an ideal model body type or an average body type. This study was intended to demonstrate any potential damages that social class, the media's advertisements, and the pressure to have the perfect body have on women's self-esteem. By recognizing that these factors may be contributing to poor or low self-esteem, the media may be able to focus their advertising designs and tactics on healthier ads and ideals instead of advertisements of unrealistic expectations on its consumers.

According to past research, all these perfect images people are exposed to on a daily basis could have a lasting effect on their perceptions of themselves. Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) is the idea that there is a tendency within individuals to look to outside images in order to evaluate their own opinions and abilities. These images may be a reference to physical reality or in comparison to other people. People look to the images portrayed by others to be obtainable and realistic, and subsequently, make comparisons among themselves, others and the idealized images. With that said, if, in fact, there has been proven research that advertisers may need to re-think the images that they are exposing people to and re-evaluate the effects this has on women's development.

A study by Guimond (2006) suggested that one of the most important differences between men and women is in their self-concepts. Self-concept is "the sum total of a being's knowledge and understanding of his or her self." (pg. 231). That study found that women have a drive to be thin because they associate a slender body type with positive outcomes. Another study completed by Diederick (2004) tested Festinger's idea of Social Comparison Theory with implicit and explicit targets. An implicit target (person) is a comparison target that simply comes to mind automatically using a process of self-evaluation, and an explicit target (person) is when participants are given the comparison target directly. Diederick (2004) found that explicit social comparison increases the accessibility of a similarity focus, which means that assimilation is stronger after explicit social comparison as opposed to implicit social comparison. Therefore when a person is presented with an explicit social comparison he or she is more likely to internalize that ideal instead of having a comparison presented to him or her more subtly. If we know these images are affecting the way people see their bodies, then in turn having a distorted view of their body may be related to having lower self-esteem.

According to Bandura (1986, 1989), perceptions of self-efficacy are defined as people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances. Theoretically, efficacy self-views influence the choices people make, the effort they expend, how long they persevere in the face of challenge and the degree of anxiety or confidence they bring to the task at hand. A study showed that the building of the distorted body image that leads to eating disorders occurs in stages. In stage 1, young women absorb the ideal image that is shown to them over and over. In stage 2, women fantasize themselves as thin, beautiful versions of their present selves. In stage 3, they become depressed when they realize what their present body looks like compared to this ideal, unrealistic, image and many resort to an eating disorder.

Friedman (2007) found that participants who endorsed more depressive symptoms and reported lower levels of self-esteem used proportionately more negative terms when describing themselves. There was a significance compartmentalization of positive from negative self descriptors when using the Beck Depression Inventory, and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. This indicates that not only does poor body image affect people's self-esteem and their likeliness to develop an eating disorder, but it also makes people more prone to other psychological problems such as depression. Previous research done by Debra Trampe (2007) supports the negative effects these perfect images have on one's self-esteem. The study found that the more body dissatisfied women were, the more they indicated that they compare their body with that of other women, including celebrities and models on the one hand, and more real life comparison targets like friends and family. Trampe also found that women who are dissatisfied with their bodies are more likely to compare themselves to other people than are women who are satisfied with their bodies. It follows that if in fact these images can change the way women feel about themselves over time, they can be even more damaging to anyone who is already dissatisfied with their body.

Research has demonstrated that women are affected by eating disorders. The latest research shows that 92% of young women and 44% of middle aged women have dieted to lose weight at least once. In a survey of women ages 18-35, 75% believed they were fat, while by medical standards only 25% would be considered overweight or obese. We are aware that the media is affecting women, but what about younger children or even men. A study done by Paxton, Eisenberg, and Neumark (2006) showed that at this stage of development when boys and girls are typically still growing physically and developing their identity, their body dissatisfaction is not yet stable, and the development is influenced to a greater extent by other physical, social, and individual attributes. Peer environmental factors such as parenting styles, and urban vs. suburban upbringing were prospective predictors of increases in body dissatisfaction from early to middle adolescence. A California study showed that by the time girls were in fourth grade, 80% were already dieting. Another study done by Dohnt (2006) showed that girls who watched television shows with an emphasis on appearance such as soap operas music television clips were less satisfied with their appearance. An estimated one thousand women die each year of anorexia nervosa, more than five million Americans suffer from eating disorders and fifteen percent of young women have substantially disordered eating attitudes and behaviors. With those statistics it is important to identify what is causing this prevalence and change these behaviors before the numbers continue to rise.

Two other studies of the adolescent population, Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive (2006) and Wang, Houshyar, and Prinstein (2006) exposed participants to ultra thin images and found that these ultra thin images not only lowered young girl's body esteem, but also decreased their satisfaction with their actual body size, heightened their desire for a thinner body. The images presented were Barbie (ultra thin), an Emme doll (average), or no doll (control). The results of the study indicated that participants

responded more positively to the Barbie than the Emme doll, however rated themselves lower on body esteem in comparison to the other doll. Overall results suggested that there may be strong social reinforcements to achieve an ideal body shape among adolescents. These findings also offer important avenues for preventative interventions including use of peer-led programs to promote fitness and healthful eating habits. Previous studies have shown that people associate being beautiful with being thin and, moreover, with being more successful. Studies show that people who are more attractive get better jobs, have better social groups, and are more active within peer and community activities. A London Guildhall University survey of 11,000 33-year-olds found that unattractive men earned 15 percent less than those deemed attractive, while plain women earned 11 percent less than their prettier counterparts. Economists also found that women considered obese in terms of their body mass index (BMI) in both 1981 and 1988 earned 17 percent less than women within their recommended BMI range.

In a study by Duyme (1988) the high rate of school failure in lower-class children has been hypothesized to arise from genetic social class differences or from cultural/environmental disadvantages. This study sought to evaluate the strength of the influence of social class on social failure. To separate genetic factors and prenatal environment from postnatal rearing conditions, 87 children relinquished at birth and adopted before the age of 3 years into different social classes were studied. Results indicated that the higher the adoptive parental social class, the more successful the adolescents were academically.

A study done by Healy, O'Shea, and Crook (1985) examined the relationship of career attitudes to different career progress and found that career attitudes related positively to age, GPA, the occupational level of one's college job and the months employed during college. They also found that the boost to academic performance increases the likelihood of securing higher level work during college which itself enhances employability. Another study done by Blustein (2002) examined the impact of social class on the school-to-work transitions of young adults in working class occupations. The study included interviews of participants who were working in low-skilled jobs and were grouped together by their socioeconomic status. The data states that social class impacts the way in which working-class young adults make meaning of their vocational lives, although participants from both socioeconomic groups wanted more from their work lives, the participants in the higher social class had more drive and motivation to change their jobs.

Another study done by Filsinger and Anderson (1982) tested the effects of social class and self-esteem in late adolescence. The study found that if individuals see themselves interacting in higher status situations, they may feel good about themselves and perform even more efficiently. These accomplishments led to feelings of self-efficacy and hence to self-esteem. Rosenberg (1975) offered another social structural hypothesis to account for variations in self-esteem during adolescence. He suggested that self-esteem is related to the dissonance of the individual's social context. This research is based on a study conducted using middle or upper middle class children. The children attending lower class schools

had significantly lower self-esteem than middle or upper class children attending higher class schools.

Previous research done by Himmerfarb and Senn (1969) about forming impressions of social class found that studies of the relations between different indexes of social class show that knowledge of a person's occupation allows us to predict both his educational and income levels reasonably accurately. With that said if people are basing the level of someone's success in society on one's social class, the amount of money they are making or even how beautiful they are, maybe society needs to develop better measures for success using healthier images. These methods are not only superficial but can prove to be very damaging to one's self-esteem and or self-concept.

Another study done by Gysbers and Johnston (1968) drew some interesting conclusions about two stereotypes of different women. Participants were women who fell into two categories, either the homemaker or the career-oriented woman. The study found that stable career women were more apt to be single, have pursued more education and come from families with more educational background. They found a strong relationship between the women's education level and that of their parents, which was an indicator of social class. Therefore, a conclusion can be drawn from his study that with more women in the workforce, with families having both parents working, social class can determine their level of education achieved and the education of their parents. Another study done about social class included research from Maruyama, Rubin, and Kingsbury (1981) where they used self-report measures and modeling techniques to examine relationships among social class, ability, educational achievement and self-esteem. Their results indicated that social class and ability were strongly related. The researchers argued that self-esteem is directly affected by ability (social class) rather than by past achievement. If, in fact, social class is a large predictor of success with education and ability, it may play a large part on one's self-esteem and self-worth.

Based on previous research, social class and body image are very large predictors of positive or negative self-esteem among different population groups. If in fact people are obsessed with being perfect, having a great job, making a lot of money, looking beautiful with an ideal body, then all of these expectations that we are putting on ourselves are just being magnified by the media. The media has taught women that if they are beautiful, and they come from a family of money, then they have achieved success. Billboard and magazine ads convey to society that if people want to be well liked and in control, have power and be happy they must look thin and have a lot of material goods. If this is how people are measuring their self-esteem in society based on the media, with images of other people modeling behaviors for them then it is not all that surprising that there has been a strong increase in eating disorders, suicide rates, and depression in the United States.

The present study examined the effects of social class and body image on one's self-esteem. Participants were randomly assigned to different conditions where they were exposed to images on a slide show of either ideal model body type or average body type. In addition, these images were of women in either a high or low social class, which was clearly reflected by their annual salary

for that particular occupation. The salaries of the different occupations were tested before the study was conducted to ensure participants would see the distinct difference in socioeconomic status to avoid any confounding variables. It was hypothesized that participants would rate themselves lower on self-esteem with questions pertaining to their own body image in the ideal model body type condition. Also with regard to social class, participants were expected to rate themselves lower on self-esteem in the higher class condition in the self-report questions than in the lower class condition. The majority of participants were college students who were currently in lower class system working vocational jobs, and were going to college to become more educated to work in higher class jobs that pay better. It was hypothesized that participants would feel more negative and rate themselves lower on self-esteem when the class system was higher than their own.

Method

Participants

The participants were a convenience sample of forty female college students from a public northeastern university. Some participants received partial course credit for their introductory psychology class. All participants were over the age of 18.

Materials

The materials necessary for completing this experiment were Microsoft Office's PowerPoint and the relevant slides. Four different slide shows were shown. The first slide show had ten images of ideal model body type of women in a higher social class, and the second slide show had ten images of average body type in a higher social class. The third slide show had women in a lower social class with model body types, and the fourth slide show had women in a lower class system with average body types. All images were obtained from www.google.com under specific job titles for females (contact the author for the photographs). The images were then distorted by the author using Adobe Photoshop to depict either an average body type, or a model body type image. Participants received a questionnaire on which they were asked to indicate the job title of the women in the picture and to respond to a series of questions about themselves, which rated their level of self-esteem after viewing the images using Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1975).

Procedure

The first step was to present each participant in the study with a letter of informed consent explaining what they were responsible for, letting them know that volunteering was optional, and that they could leave at any time without penalty. Participants were told they were completing a study about gender stereotyping in the workforce and were asked to watch a Power Point presentation of the slides in the same order in all conditions and answer the

questionnaire (see Appendix). A manipulation check was done to assess if the participants were aware of the occupation of the woman in the picture and indicate her body type to show a higher or lower social class and that they were aware of her body type. Participants were asked to answer to the best of their ability. They were encouraged to give honest answers and respond with their initial reactions. After viewing the PowerPoint slides participants were asked to answer a few questions about how they felt about themselves (self report self-esteem measure) using a likert scale, their future occupation and desired salary. After all participants answered the questionnaire and viewed the slides they were debriefed. This was an opportunity to explain to the participants that the experiment's purpose to examine the effects of social class and body image on their self-esteem. The experimenter then passed out a handout for a local counseling center and gave contact information in the event that participation in this experiment had caused any discomfort in the participants. Participants then had the opportunity to ask questions, and express any concerns. Participants were acknowledged for their participation and thanked for helping with the collection of data.

Results

Univariate analysis of variance was employed to examine the effects of body image and social class on women's self-esteem. Using the dependent measure of the questionnaire the results were calculated using Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale, (Rosenberg, 1975) to determine levels of self-esteem after participants viewed different images. Responses were scored such that higher numbers reflected greater self-esteem. Each item was scored from between 0 and 3 points, and therefore the maximum possible range for total scores was zero to thirty. Scores between fifteen and twenty-five are within normal range and scores below fifteen suggest low self-esteem. With regard to the independent variables of body image and social class no significant differences were found with participants who viewed model body type images with women in lower class occupations ($M = 18.2, SD = 4.15$), model body type images in higher class occupations ($M = 19.4, SD = 4.17$), average body type images in lower class occupations ($M = 20.5, SD = 3.95$), and average body type images in higher class occupations ($M = 18.9, SD = 4.35$). This indicates that neither social class nor body image had any significant effects on how women rated their own self-esteem $F(1,36) = 1.13, p = .294$. All F tests conducted yielded no significant differences with regard to both independent measures. Overall there were no main effects and no significant interactions found in this study with regard to social class or body image on self-esteem.

Discussion

The results of this study did not support the original hypothesis. There were no significant effects found with regard to social class or body image on women's self-esteem in this study. Prior research done by Thompson et al., (1999) and Johnson & Wardle, (2005) has shown that body dissatisfaction puts women's health

at risk, and causes other psychological consequences such as depression and eating disorders. Other research done by Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive (2006), where they exposed participants to ultra thin images proved to not only lower young girl's body self-esteem but also decreased body satisfaction. The present researcher's findings were not consistent with previous findings from other researchers.

One possible weakness of the present study was that the images participants viewed were distorted by using Adobe Photoshop, and the distortion may not have been dramatic enough to produce significant differences. Another limitation of the study could have been the occupations chosen for the participants. In future studies experimenters may want to try different occupations. It is possible that participants related differently to the higher and lower socioeconomic occupations provided and would have responded differently with a greater distinction with identifying the women's profession in the images viewed. Some of the images presented were of a female doctor and a female nurse future studies may want to show these different professions not so close together on the power point presentation. Also the images presented may have needed to show a greater significance between higher and lower social class occupations by using different females, possibly younger to be easier to relate to a sample of college students. Lastly, due to time constraints and equipment availability there was a small sample size which made for a low powered test. The issue of social class and body image with regard to self-esteem still requires additional research to identify the relevant factors that may be responsible for low self-esteem in women.

References

- Blustein, D. L. (2002). Voices of the forgotten half: The role of social class in the school-to-work transition. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 49*, 311-323.
- Diederik, S. (2004). Method matters: Effects of explicit versus implicit social comparisons on activation, behavior, and self-views. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 87*, 860-875.
- Dittmar, H., Halliwell, E., & Ive, S. (2006). Does barbie make girls want to be thin? The effect of experimental exposure to images of dolls on the body image. *Developmental Psychology, 42*, 283-293.
- Dohnt, H. (2006). The contribution of peer and media influences to the development of body satisfaction and self-esteem in young girls: A prospective study. *Developmental Psychology, 42*, 929-936.
- Filsinger, E. E. & Anderson, C. C. (1982). Social class and self-esteem in late adolescence: Dissonant context or self-efficacy? *Developmental Psychology, 18*, 380-384.
- Friedman, E., T., & Haaga, D., A. (2007). Using hierarchical classes to analyze organization of the self-concept. *European Journal of Psychological Assessments, 23*, 9-14.
- Guimond, S., & Chatard, A. (2006). Social comparison, self-stereotyping, and gender differences in self-construals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 90*, 221-242.
- Gysbers, N. C., & Johnston, J., A. (1968). Characteristics of homemaker-and career-oriented women. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 15*, 541-546
- Healy, C., O'Shea, D., & Crook, R., H. (1985). Relation of career attitudes to age and career progress during college. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 32*, 239-244.
- Himmerfarb, S., & Senn, D., J. (1969). Forming impressions of social class: Two tests of an averaging model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 12*, 38-51.
- Maruyama, G., Rubin, R. A., & Kingsbury, G. G. (1981). Self-esteem and educational achievement: independent constructs with a common cause? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 40*, 962-975.
- Paxton, S. J., Eisenberg, M. E., Neumark, D. (2006). Prospective predictors of body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls and boys: A five-year longitudinal study. *Developmental Psychology, 42*, 888-899.
- Trampe, D., Stapel, D. A., & Siero, F. W. (2007). On models and vases: body dissatisfaction and proneness to social comparison effects. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92*, 106-118.
- Wang, S. S., Houshyar, S., & Prinstein, M. J. (2006). Adolescent girls' and boys' weight related health behaviors and cognitions: associations with reputation-and preference-based peer status. *Health Psychology, 25*, 658-663.

Appendix

Gender Stereotypes in the Workforce

Directions: Please fill in all of the information to the best of your ability. You are encouraged to answer all questions as accurately and honestly as possible.

Age: _____

Gender: Male _____ Female _____

Grade Level:

Freshmen Sophomore Junior Senior Other

Please Estimate Combined Annual Income of Your Parents:

\$20,000-\$30,000 \$40,000-\$60,000
 \$80,000-\$100,000 \$200,000+

Please take a moment to look over each slide and respond as quickly as possible. Remember there is no right or wrong answer, use your best judgments.

Slide

Occupation _____

Body Type Slim/Slender Average Overweight/Obese

Instructions-Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. If you strongly agree, circle **SA**. If you agree with the statement, circle **A**. If you disagree, circle **D**. If you strongly disagree, circle **SD**.

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

SA A D SD

2. At times, I think I am no good at all.

SA A D SD

3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

SA A D SD

4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.

SA A D SD

5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.

SA A D SD

6. I certainly feel useless at times.

SA A D SD

7. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.

SA A D SD

8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.

SA A D SD

9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.

SA A D SD

10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

SA A D SD