

Anna VanSeveren: SJA Abstract

Bell, J., Dolan, A., Rieger, E., Thomas, B. (2017). The effect of interpersonal rejection on attentional biases regarding thin-ideal and non-thin images: The moderation role of body weight- and shape-based self-worth. *Body Image*, 22, 78-86.
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Keywords: body image, interpersonal rejection, attentional bias, interpersonal theory of eating disorders

Summary

Literature Review: This study examines general interpersonal relationships. The authors' focus is broad, making their results applicable to many different people and many different types of relationships. More specifically, this study examines interpersonal rejection, whether explicit or implied, and its effect on those with weight-based self-worth. While most people base their self-worth on their performance across a number of life experiences (academic abilities, relationships with others, etc.), those with eating disorders, and those with a higher risk for eating disorders, largely limit the evaluation of their self-worth to their body weight or shape. A concept that this study examines in length is attentional bias. Attentional bias is the tendency for people's perception to be affected by their recurring thoughts at the time. The main theory of this study is the interpersonal theory of eating disorders (IPT-ED). The theory states that negative interpersonal experiences, whether perceived or actual, trigger negative self-evaluation. The theory also states that vulnerable individuals, those who base their self-worth on their body weight, will engage in disordered eating behaviors in an attempt to overcome this negative self-evaluation triggered by negative interpersonal experiences. Based on this theory, the authors' overall hypothesis is that interpersonal rejection will trigger attention biases in response to certain stimuli for individuals whose self-worth is based on their body weight. More specifically, those who experience interpersonal rejection and base their self-worth on their body weight will express an attentional bias toward non-thin images. That is, those people will avoid thin-ideal images and prefer images that depict non-thin body parts. This hypothesis, while based on the IPT-ED, is also based on other studies conducted about this subject.

Method: This three-part study was measured quantitatively, utilizing both questionnaires and statistics to gather data. Participants in this study were recruited from the Australian National University's Research School of Psychology. All 94 participants were women ages 17-30. These specific demographics were chosen because eating disorders mainly affect women of this age group. However, all participants had to take a preliminary questionnaire in order to make sure none of them had an active eating disorder. The first part of the actual study entailed a set of online questionnaires to determine whether the participants' self-esteem was linked to their body-esteem. In the second part, participants played a virtual ball toss game to model interpersonal rejection and acceptance. The randomly selected participants who were placed in the accepted group received the ball 33% of the time, while those in the rejected group only received it 5% of the time. To close out the second part of the study, participants completed another questionnaire, rating how they felt about themselves after the ball toss game. The third and final part of the experiment measured attentional biases. Participants viewed a pair of images that appeared on a computer screen for a split second. One image was either a thin-ideal image or a non-thin image of a body part (the target image), and the other image was a picture of an animal (the control image). Immediately after the images disappeared on the screen, a 'p' or a 'q' would appear in place of either the control or the target image. Participants were asked to press 'p' or 'q' on the keyboard as quickly as they could when they saw the letter appear. Their reaction time was measured to determine whether attentional biases were present.

Discussion: The authors' general hypothesis was correct; attentional biases did occur after interpersonal rejection in those whose self-worth is connected to their body weight. However, their results show that those attentional biases were actually opposite of what their hypothesis predicted. Participants whose body weight was linked to their self-worth and who were placed in the rejection group *gravitated* toward thin-ideal images instead of avoiding them, as the authors predicted. This result has potentially dangerous implications, implications that can be understood using social comparison theory. Social comparison theory explains that people compare themselves to others in order to determine their own success and ability. If someone realizes that they fall short of their comparison, then they will engage in behaviors perceived as necessary in order to meet that standard. When comparison happens for someone who has been interpersonally rejected and whose body weight is linked to their self-worth, they could end up engaging in disordered eating behaviors (dieting, restricting, purging, etc.) just to live up to their comparison to thin-ideal images or thin-ideal people in their lives. Those disordered eating behaviors could eventually lead to a full-blown eating disorder. This is the biggest takeaway from this study. The results of this study can allow us to be more self-aware in our interpersonal relationships and to make sure that we are not disconfirming others, but rather supporting others.

Evaluation

For the most part, the concepts presented in this article were very clear and easy to understand after a few reads, and I definitely agree with the conclusions they reached. I was a little surprised to see that they hypothesized that those whose self-worth was based on their body weight would have attentional biases toward non-thin images after being interpersonally rejected, but I understand they made that conjecture based on past studies. I liked how they still made sense of their results even though the results did not necessarily match their hypothesis. The authors thoroughly explain the implications of the results and mention potential opportunities for further research. They seem to be aware of ways in which their experiment might have fallen short and how that can be fixed in the future.

I definitely think the authors of this article are bringing new information to light about the development of eating disorders. Because other research on the relationship between interpersonal rejection and those whose self-worth is based on their body weight has been conducted using participants with active eating disorders, I think this study offers new and insightful information on how eating disorders are born in interpersonal situations. The results of this study open up new avenues for future research. It would be incredibly interesting to conduct a study to compare the attentional biases between those who do not have eating disorders but who base their self-worth on their body weight and those who have an active eating disorder. That study would combine the research of past studies with this current study and potentially provide even more insight into how interpersonal rejection affects those groups of people. The study I looked into did not include males in their research, so I think it could also be interesting to see how interpersonal rejection affects different genders, or even sexual orientations. The results of this study can be applied to any interpersonal relationship. It could help people become more self-aware of the words they use or non-verbal actions they take when they are around others. Whether disconfirmation is intentional or not, this study shows that it can have potentially dangerous consequences.