

## Selected Studies for Social Norms and Body Image

Title: **Body Image Disturbance and the Social Norms Approach: An Integrative Review of the Literature**

Authors: [Bergstrom, Rochelle Lea](#); [Neighbors, Clayton](#)

Source: *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 2006, 25, 9, 975-1000, Guilford Publications

Abstract: This article merges two existing literatures: the body image literature and the social norms literature. Body image disturbance, which is known to be related to the development of eating disorders, continues to be an important area of study, particularly among college women. Perceived norms are known to be related to the occurrence of a variety of behaviors and attitudes, including heavy drinking and body image disturbance. Not only do existing norms influence behavior, but misperceptions regarding actual norms, which occur for a variety of reasons, are known to predict behavior as well. Interventions aimed at correcting normative misperceptions and thereby reducing problematic behaviors have shown promising results. Because normative misperceptions regarding norms for attractive body image predict eating disordered behaviors, applying intervention strategies based on correcting perceptions of the norm may prove to be a fruitful endeavor.

URL: <http://www.atypon-link.com/GPI/doi/pdfplus/10.1521/jscp.2006.25.9.975>

Title: **Who Feels Discrepant and How Does Feeling Discrepant Matter? Examining the Presence and Consequences of Feeling Discrepant from Personal and Social Norms Related to Thinness in American and British High School Girls**

Authors: Sanderson, Catherine A. , Wallier, Jenny M., Stockdale, Jan E., & Yopyk, Darren J. A.

Source: *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 2008, 27(9), 995-1020.

Abstract: This research examines whether both American and British girls feel discrepant from social and personal norms related to thinness and the consequences of such discrepancy on rates of disordered eating. High school girls in the United States ( $N = 198$ ) and Great Britain ( $N = 74$ ) completed measures of their own eating and body-related attitudes and behaviors as well as their perceptions of other girls' attitudes and behaviors. As predicted, participants in both countries believed that, compared to themselves, other girls are thinner, have thinner ideal bodies, and exercise more for aesthetic reasons (e.g., weight loss, attractiveness, toning). Girls in both countries believed that

their ideal body shapes are smaller than their current body shapes. In addition, both British and American girls who believed their current figure was smaller than that of other girls, and those who believed their ideal figure was smaller than their current figure, showed greater drive for thinness. Finally, actual-ideal self-discrepancy was associated with more symptoms of bulimia in British girls, but not in American girls. Discussion focuses on the theoretical and applied implications of these findings.

URL: <http://www.atyponlink.com/GPI/doi/pdf/10.1521/jscp.2008.27.9.995?cookieSet=1>

Title: **Perceived norms for thinness and muscularity among college students: What do men and women really want?**

Authors: Grossbard, Joel R., Neighbors, Clayton, & Larimer, Mary E.

Source: [Eating Behaviors](#), 2011, 12(3), 192-199

Abstract: **Background:** Perceived norms are related to health-related attitudes and behaviors, including body image. The current study examined body dissatisfaction and perceived norms for thinness and muscularity among male and female college students.  
**Method:** Participants included 842 undergraduate students (64.5% female) who completed an online survey assessing body image and other health-related attitudes and behaviors. A series of independent sample and paired sample t tests were conducted to document sex differences in body dissatisfaction and misperceptions of thinness and muscularity norms.  
**Results:** Based on pictorial ratings, both males and females reported discrepancies between their ideal and actual figures. Females perceived other females as significantly thinner and less muscular than the actual norms. Males perceived other males as significantly heavier than their own figures, but the difference between men's self-reported muscularity and perceived norm was not significant. Both males and females misperceived opposite-sex attractiveness norms for thinness and muscularity.  
**Discussion:** Results suggest the importance of evaluating same-sex and opposite-sex perceived norms of thinness and muscularity in the etiology of body dissatisfaction, and this research informs social norms interventions targeting misperceptions of body image norms among both males and females.

URL: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1471015311000407>

Title: **The role of social norms and friends' influences on unhealthy weight-control behaviors among adolescent girls**

Authors: [Eisenberg, M.E.](#); [Neumark-Sztainer, D.](#); [Story, M.](#); [Perry, C.](#)

Source: [Soc.Sci.Med.](#), 2005, 60, 6, 1165-1173

Abstract: Dieting is common among adolescent girls and may place them at risk of using unhealthy weight-control behaviors (UWCBs), such as self-induced vomiting, laxatives, diet pills, or fasting. Research has suggested that social factors, including friends and broader cultural norms, may be associated with UWCBs.

The present study examines the relationship between the school-wide prevalence of current weight loss efforts among adolescent girls, friends' dieting behavior, and UWCBs, and investigates differences in these associations across weight categories. Survey data were collected in 31 middle and high schools in ethnically and socio-economically diverse communities in Minnesota, USA. The response rate was 81.5%. Rates of UWCBs were compared across the spectrum of prevalence of trying to lose weight and friends' involvement with dieting, using chi squared analysis and multivariate logistic regression, controlling for demographic factors and clustering by school. Girls with higher body mass index (BMI) were more likely to engage in UWCBs than those of lower BMI. Multivariate models indicated that friends' dieting behavior was significantly associated with UWCBs for average weight girls (OR = 1.57, CI = 1.40-1.77) and moderately overweight girls (OR = 1.47, CI = 1.19-1.82). The school-wide prevalence of trying to lose weight was significantly, albeit modestly, related to UWCBs for average weight girls (15th-85th percentile; OR = 1.17, CI = 1.01-1.36), and marginally associated for modestly overweight girls (85th-95th percentile; OR = 1.21, CI = .97-1.50), even after controlling for friends' dieting behaviors. The social influences examined here were not associated with UWCBs among underweight (95th percentile) girls. Findings suggest that social norms, particularly from within one's peer group, but also at the larger school level may influence UWCBs, particularly for average weight girls. Implications for school-based interventions to reduce UWCBs are discussed.

URL: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953604003454>

Title: **Stress and the Theory of Planned Behavior: Understanding Healthy and Unhealthy Eating Intentions**

Authors: Louis, Winnifred R., Chan, Marc K.-H., & Greenbaum, Seth

Source: [Journal of Applied Social Psychology](#), 2009, 39(2), 472-493

Abstract: Unhealthy and healthy eating intentions are predicted in a sample of 154 university students by the theory of planned behavior variables, in interaction with life stress. Specifically, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control (PBC) are shown to interact with life stress in relation to intentions to eat unhealthy foods, such that at high stress, the effects of subjective norms and PBC are attenuated. Implications are discussed for studies involving the planned behavior model and the study of life stress and unhealthy eating, for the theory of planned behavior more broadly, as well as for interventions targeting university students' eating intentions.

URL: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2008.00447.x/pdf>

Title: **Predicting adolescent eating and activity behaviors: the role of social norms and personal agency**

Authors: [Baker,C.W.](#); [Little,T.D.](#); [Brownell,K.D.](#)

Source: [Health Psychology](#), 2003, 22, 2, 189-198

**Abstract:** Guided by the theory of planned behavior, this 2-week longitudinal study examined health behaviors in a sample of 279 adolescents. Social norms and perceived behavioral control (PBC) were tested as predictors of self-reported intentions and behaviors in 2 domains, eating and physical activity. Differentiating, as opposed to aggregating, parent and peer norms provided unique information. For PBC, the authors distinguished global causality beliefs from self-related agency beliefs and intraself (effort, ability) from extraself (parents, teachers) means. Intraself agency beliefs strongly predicted healthy intentions, whereas intraself causality beliefs had a negative influence. Patterns differed somewhat across behaviors and gender. Results highlight theoretical issues and provide potential targets for research on health promotion programs for youth.

**URL:** [http://www.agencylab.ku.edu/~agencylab/manuscripts/\(Baker,%20Little%20and%20Brownell%202003\).pdf](http://www.agencylab.ku.edu/~agencylab/manuscripts/(Baker,%20Little%20and%20Brownell%202003).pdf)

**Title:** **Peer weight norm misperception as a risk factor for being over and underweight among UK secondary school students**

**Authors:** Perkins, J M, Perkins, H W, & Craig, D W

**Source:** European Journal of Clinical Nutrition, 2010, 64, 965–971

**Abstract:** **Background:** Erroneous perceptions of peer weight norms may be important risk factors for being underweight and overweight. This study assessed misperceptions of peer weight norms and their association with being overweight or underweight among UK youth.

**Methods:** Anonymous surveys were conducted among students (n=2104) attending schools in a Greater London borough in Fall 2007. Students' perceptions of the weight norm for same sex peers in their year in their school (years 5 through 11) are compared with the aggregate self-reports of weight for these same sex and year cohorts in each school. Variation in perceptions is compared with personal body mass index (BMI) on the basis of self-reported height and weight.

**Results:** A total of 34% of males and 32% of females overestimated peer weight norms by more than 5% (10 kg on average). Similarly, 37% of males and 43% of females underestimated peer weight norms by more than 5% (7 kg on average). For both males and females, overestimating peer weight norms was associated with a greater risk for being overweight and underestimating peer weight norms was associated with a greater risk for being underweight. Perceived peer weight norm was the strongest predictor of BMI among females compared with estimated actual weight norms of peers (based on the mean of self-reported weight) and demographic factors, and one of the two strongest predictors among males in linear regression analyses, including schools as fixed effects. **Conclusions:** Pervasive misperceptions of peer weight norms may contribute to unhealthy weight-related behaviors and help perpetuate students' overweight or underweight status. Future research should examine perceptions of other weight-related peer norms and explore what may create misperceptions. Addressing pervasive misperceptions of weight could perhaps be included as a part of interventions aimed at reducing unhealthy weight and

related behaviors.

URL: <http://www.nature.com/ejcn/journal/v64/n9/pdf/ejcn2010106a.pdf>

**The following sites may also be of use to you:**

**1) H. Wesley Perkins and David W. Craig's "Body Weight and the Effects of Misperceived Norms on Personal Body Image in Adolescence: Results from an Online Assessment Tool for Secondary Schools" presentation:**

Data are drawn from an online survey taken by students (N=5698) from seven middle and high schools. Results of four analyses are presented: 1) Body mass index distributions by gender and grade are reported in relation to healthy body mass ranges to assess the prevalence of under/overweight adolescents. 2) Perceptions of average male and female body masses are compared with actual average body masses at each school to assess the extent of misperception of body weight norms. 3) Students' subjective assessments of themselves as over/underweight are then compared to the objective standards. 4) Finally, discrepancies between actually being under/overweight and perceiving oneself to be under/over weight are assessed in relation to misperceptions of the actual peer norms. Implications for school health programs are discussed.

<http://www.alcoholeducationproject.org/current/bodyimageslides-2005.pdf>

**2) Multiple studies in H. W. Perkins (ed.), *The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age Substance Abuse: A Handbook for Educators, Counselors, and Clinicians*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.**

This resource offers educators, counselors, and clinicians a handbook for understanding and implementing an alternative to traditional methods for preventing substance abuse among young people. The "social norms" approach outlined in this book identifies young people's dramatic misperceptions about peers' norms and promotes accurate public reporting of actual positive norms that exist in all student populations. The social norms approach examines how phenomena beyond the individual's personality and personal values are important determinants of behavior and offers information about how these influences can be changed. Among the issues addressed by the contributors are specific techniques, programs, and field-tested results of the application of this method in a variety of school and community settings. This book shows how this approach works with different age groups and reveals the potential for applying a social norms approach, not only for problem drinking, smoking, and other substance abuse, but also for other areas of prevention work, including hate speech, sexual aggression, and eating disorders.

**3) Formative Research for the UCLA EATask Force's Body Image Social Marketing Campaign**

This document lists the process through which UCLA began its social norms campaign on body image and may be a useful resource to practitioners on college and university campuses.

[http://www.lifeed.ucla.edu/documents/EMHFinal282Paper--  
FinalFormatting\\_000.pdf](http://www.lifeed.ucla.edu/documents/EMHFinal282Paper--FinalFormatting_000.pdf)

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