

The Role of Conformity to the Superwoman Ideal in the Relationship between Personality and Eating Disorder Symptomatology in Adolescents

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Abstract

Disordered eating, conformity to the Superwoman Ideal, and the personality dimensions of sociotropy and autonomy were examined in female and male high school adolescents. Based on previous research it was hypothesized that all personality dimensions would be directly correlated with disordered eating, but that adherence to the Superwoman Ideal would mediate the relationship between sociotropy and autonomy and disordered eating. Conflict between sociotropy and autonomy was examined through an interaction effect. Separate path analyses were examined for boys and girls and results for the girls showed that both the Superwoman Ideal and sociotropy had significant direct effects on disordered eating attitudes and behaviors, however, there did not appear to be a mediation effect as predicted. Results pertaining to males were somewhat unclear since the Superwoman Scale was originally constructed for use in females; however, it appears that for males the SWI does not directly relate to disordered eating as it does for females.

Results

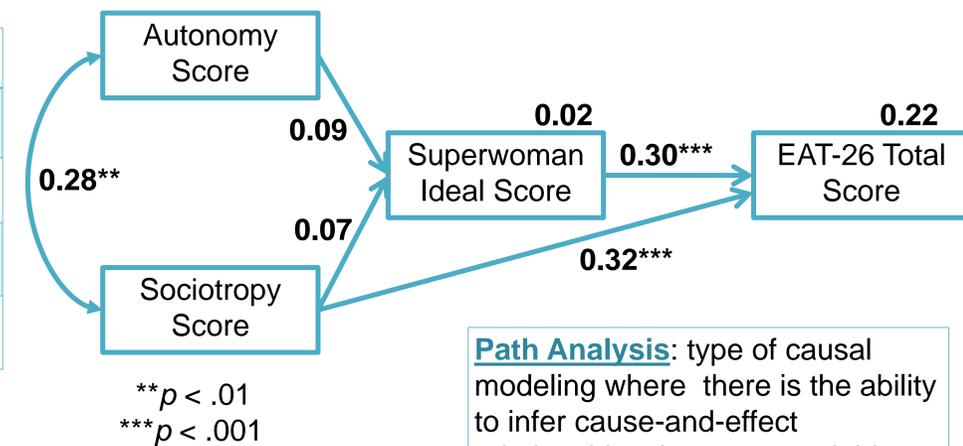
Measures	Male (N=61)		Female (N=103)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Sociotropy	87.87	14.40	92.36	16.78
Autonomy	86.75	15.08	86.07	14.84
Superwoman Ideal	81.94	12.73	83.92	12.99
Eating Attitudes Test – 26	6.65*	5.85	9.22*	9.96

* significantly differ $p < .05$

•Note – 10% of the female sample scored above the clinical range for an eating disorder (EAT-26 score ≥ 20)

Fit of Model	Female	Male
Chi-square (df = 1)	0.23	0.82
Probability	0.63	0.67
CFI	1.00	1.00
RMSEA	0.00	0.00

Model - Girls



Path Analysis: type of causal modeling where there is the ability to infer cause-and-effect relationships between variables based on correlational data. Allows for both direct and indirect causal effects to be estimated.



Introduction

- Adolescence is a critical period of transition that often involves increased levels of stress and identity formation
- Some girls may feel pressure to conform to the **Superwoman Ideal (SWI)**, which is the belief that one must be successful in many different life roles
 - Must have the perfect slim body, boyfriend/husband, family/kids, and job (and low recognition of the likely conflict between these roles)
- Similarly, these adolescents may be seeking excessive approval from others and need to please others
 - Sociotropy** is the personality characteristic that involves heightened need for other's approval and praise (Robins et al., 1994)
- Yet these individuals may also be goal driven and suffer from extreme perfectionism
 - Autonomy** is the personality characteristic that involves the need for self-accomplishment, perfectionism, and independence (Clark, Steer, Beck, & Ross, 1995)
- The SWI, sociotropy, and autonomy have all been found to be independently associated with eating disorders
 - No studies have look at the relationship between all three factors and eating disorders in adolescents
- Eating disorders are the third most common, chronic illness in female adolescents (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003)

Methods

Procedures:

- The college IRB and school district approved the study and teachers were contacted about allowing the survey to be administered during class time
- Parent consent forms were sent home with students and had to be signed before participation in the study
 - Student assent forms were also filled out prior to taking the survey and teachers were not allowed to look at student surveys

Measures:

- **Superwoman Scale** (Murnen, Smolak, & Levine, 1994) – an adapted 22-item version for adolescents was used, worded in a gender neutral manner
 - Cronbach's alpha (girls) = 0.75
 - Cronbach's alpha (boys) = 0.81
- **Revised Personal Style Inventory (PSI-II)**; Robins et al., 1994) - 48-item scale measuring both sociotropy and autonomy
 - Cronbach's alpha (sociotropy) = 0.87
 - Cronbach's alpha (autonomy) = 0.84
- **Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-26)**; Garner, Olmsted, Bohr, & Garfinkel, 1982) – 26-item measuring disordered eating
 - Cronbach's alpha (girls) = 0.89
 - Cronbach's alpha (boys) = 0.70

Discussion

- The hypothesis that conformity to the SWI would mediate the path between sociotropy, autonomy, and disordered eating was not fully supported
 - However, the SWI and sociotropy were both significantly and directly correlated to disordered eating in girls
 - Girls who experience more adherence to the SWI may be engaging in more disordered eating in attempt to look like the perfect, thin ideal woman who society deems as beautiful and successful
 - Similarly, girls who want to be admired and approved of by others, thus scoring high on sociotropy, may also be suffering from problematic eating as a way to gain praise and admiration from others
 - Further research need to focus on examining the role of perfectionism and also other possible health consequences of the SWI, such as anxiety and depression
- Unlike the female data, the male data appeared to support the hypothesis in that both sociotropy and autonomy were significantly and directly related to the SWI
 - However, conformity to the SWI was not linked to disordered eating males, nor was sociotropy
 - Males may have better outcomes if they score high on the SWI because there is less of an emphasis and pressure on males to meet society's thin ideal
- Limitation:** The sample size for both males and females was small for conducting a path analysis
- Strength:** Ethnically diverse sample (58.5% White, 4.3% Hispanic/Latino, 6.7% Asian, 10.4% Black, 18.9% Multiethnic/Other)

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