The Relationship Between Eating Disorders and Conformity in Female College Students

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The relation between conformity and eating disorders was investigated in female college students. Undergraduate college women answered questions from the Cooperativeness (formerly Conformity) subscale of the Jackson Personality Inventory and completed the Eating Disorders Inventory (EDI). Results indicated a significant positive correlation between conformity scores and EDI scores. Sorority members scored significantly higher than nonsorority members on both the conformity scale and the EDI. These findings are congruent with Gaylor, Meilman, and von Hippel (1991) who focused on the relationship between sorority membership, pressure to be thin, and the incidence of eating disorders.

The purpose of this study was to examine the possible relation between conformity and the eating disorders of anorexia and bulimia in female college students. Recent research suggests there is a connection between these two variables. For example, it was found that, compared to control participants, “weight-preoccupied” college women perceived the students on their campus as placing more importance on appearance (Connor-Greene, Striegel-Moore, & Cronan, 1994). The authors concluded that this perceived emphasis on attractiveness and appearance could also lead to perceived pressure to achieve the sociocultural ideal of thinness, thus leading to possibly higher incidence of eating disorders. According to Connor-Greene et al. (1994), these “weight-preoccupied women may selectively attend to environmental cues about appearance” (p. 131).

Pliner and Chaiken (1990) examined eating behaviors in the presence of an opposite-sex partner. College students ate a meal with someone of the opposite sex, and the amount eaten was measured. It was found that women ate less in the presence of men than in the presence of women. In the same study, a separate group of women filled out a questionnaire regarding eating behaviors. They responded that they were concerned about being viewed as socially desirable and conforming to a “feminine” stereotype, and that these concerns accounted for their eating behavior.

Guarino, Fridrich, and Sitton (1994) observed women and men in a cafeteria setting. Women and men went through the cafeteria line in pairs, either with a partner of the same or opposite sex. The study showed that when it came to choosing a dessert, women were significantly more likely to conform to the pattern set by the other person of the pair. Women also showed a stronger tendency to conform to the pattern set by the lead of the pair when that person was a woman. This study concluded that women are more likely to conform to the patterns set by other women in terms of eating behaviors. Thus the Pliner and Chaiken (1990), Connor-Greene et al. (1994),
and Guarino et al. (1994) studies suggest that a positive relation exists between eating disorders and pressures to conform.

Other studies suggest a relation between sorority membership, pressures to conform, and eating disorders. Eagly and Chrvala (1986) found that women were more likely to conform when in a group setting. Their results indicated that women were more likely to conform if they knew the opinions of the women they were with and if they knew their actions were observable by others. This study suggests that conformity pressures may be higher for sorority members than for nonsorority members; a sorority can easily be classified as a group setting where members are aware that their actions are observable, and sorority members often know the opinions of other members. Admittance is usually by unanimous vote and discrimination policies are enforced.

Another study noted a higher incidence of eating disorders among sorority members than among nonsorority members (Meilman, von Hippel, & Gaylor, 1991). From their participant pool, students were classified as either eating purgers (those purging fewer than four times per month) or high-frequency eating purgers (those purging at least four times per month). Of the eating purgers, 72.2% were sorority members, whereas 80% of the high-frequency eating purgers were sorority members.

A link between the incidence of eating disorders and conformity in sorority members also was observed by Crandall (1988), who found that in two particular sororities, popularity was measured by the amount a member binged. In one sorority, the more a women binged, the greater her popularity. In the other sorority, binging “the right amount,” as defined by other members of the sorority, was associated with popularity. If one binged more or less than the average, one was less popular. He also found that by the end of the school year, the amount that a girl binged could be accurately predicted by the amount her friends binged. Similar findings were reported by Connor-Greene et al. (1994) in different sororities on different college campuses. These results demonstrate that conformity pressure about eating behaviors may exist in some sororities.

Based on these reports, the three hypotheses of the present study were: (a) There will be a positive correlation between scores on the Eating Disorders Inventory (EDI; Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983) and the Cooperativeness (formerly Conformity) subscale of the Jackson Personality Inventory (Jackson, 1994); (b) Sorority members will score higher on the EDI than nonsorority members; and (c) Sorority members will score higher on the Cooperative-ness subscale of the Jackson Personality Inventory.

Method

Participants

The participants were 38 female undergraduate college students. Twenty students were enrolled in introductory psychology classes and participated for course credit. Sixteen students were paid five dollars for their participation and 2 students were unpaid volunteers. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 23. Nineteen participants were sorority members and 19 were nonsorority members.

Materials

Each participant received the EDI and also a two-page questionnaire prepared by the examiner. This questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions regarding the participants’ weight and perceived self-weight problems, sorority membership, and demographic information such as age. Also included were questions from the Cooperativeness subscale of the Jackson Personality Inventory. According to the test manual a high scorer on this subscale “is susceptible to social influence and social pressures; tends to modify behavior to be consistent with standards set by others; follows suit and fits in” (Jackson, 1994, p. 4).

Procedure

Participants entered the testing room, seated themselves, and filled out the two questionnaires following brief instructions from the examiner. In order to better ensure participants’ anonymity, they were asked to remain seated after completing both questionnaires. This procedure was used so the examiner would not be able to determine their identities from the order in which they returned their questionnaires upon leaving the testing room. When all participants were finished, they placed their questionnaires into an envelope in an order inconsistent with their seating arrangement. The participants were debriefed approximately 1 month later.

Results

The first hypothesis, that there is a relationship between conformity and eating disorders, was evaluated with a correlational analysis. A significant positive correlation existed between scores on the EDI and the Cooperativeness subscale, \( r(35) = .437, p < .01 \). The second hypothesis, that sorority women would have higher conformity scores, was analyzed using a one-tailed, independent groups \( t \) test. The mean conformity score for sorority women was 8.39 (SD = 5.28), whereas the mean conformity score for
nonsorority members was 5.85 (SD = 3.12). A significant difference was found between sorority and nonsorority members’ scores on the Cooperativeness subscale, t(36) = 1.83, p < .038. The third hypothesis, that sorority women would score higher on the EDI, was analyzed using a one-tailed, independent groups t test. The mean EDI score for sorority women was 50.5 (SD = 40.93), whereas the mean score for nonsorority women was 31.5 (SD = 23.37). A significant difference was found between sorority members and nonsorority members’ scores on the EDI, t(36) = 1.78, p < .042.

Discussion

This study found support for all three hypotheses. There was a positive correlation between Cooperativeness subscale scores and EDI scores. Sorority members scored higher on the EDI and on the Cooperativeness subscale of the Jackson Personality Inventory than did nonsorority members.

The results indicate there is a significantly greater incidence of conformity among sorority members than among nonsorority members. They also indicate that eating disorder symptoms were more common among sorority members. Because this was a correlational study, causal inferences cannot be made between conformity and eating disorders; however, it is likely that helping women, especially sorority members, deal with conformity pressures might reduce the risk of eating disorders. This issue is worthy of further investigation.

References


In Memoriam

Unfortunately, Natalie Smith will not have the opportunity to see her article in print. She had just started a graduate program in counseling at Indiana University in September, when she was stricken with an unexpected illness and died a few days later. Natalie did experience the satisfaction of formulating and executing a worthwhile experiment, and she enjoyed presenting her findings at the Michigan Undergraduate Psychology Research Conference at Albion College. Natalie was especially thrilled to be notified that her article had been accepted for publication in this journal. May she always be remembered for her devotion to psychology, her desire to help others, her encouraging smile, and the light in her eyes.