Reputation-Based Crowd Affiliation and Disordered Eating in a Clinical Population of Adolescents
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INTRODUCTION
- Peer groups play an important role in adolescents’ development and mental health.
- When these influences are negative, peer groups may constitute a risk factor for eating disorders (ED).2,3,4
- Studies using community samples have found disordered eating tendencies to be elevated in certain peer groups.4,5
- Little is known about the characteristics of these peer groups.
- The role of peer groups has received little research attention in clinical populations of youth with an ED.3
- Crowd affiliation (i.e., reputation-based social labels applied to large groups) is an important component of peer groups.6

PURPOSE
Using a clinical sample of adolescents, this study explored the association between crowd affiliation and:
(a) ED symptoms,
(b) the belief that thinness is important for popularity, and
(c) adolescents’ perceptions of disordered eating among friends.

HYPOTHESES
Compared to average and low status crowds, youth in high status crowds would report:
(a) more ED symptoms,
(b) a stronger belief that thinness is important for popularity,
(c) more perceived disordered eating among friends.

METHOD
PARTICIPANTS
- N = 175 females, 12 to 19 years (M = 15.35, SD = 1.75).
- Recruited from community and university-based outpatient ED programs in Windsor (Canada) & Chicago (America).
- 25 with an ED, 25 with a depressive disorder (DD), and 25 controls.
- Of the 25 with an ED, 17 (68%) had a diagnosis of anorexia, and 8 (32%) had bulimia.
- Of the 25 with a DD, 20 (80%) had a diagnosis of major depressive disorder, 4 (16%) had dysthymia, and 1 (4%) had an elevated BDI (21).

MEASURES
- Diagnoses were assessed using the Kiddie – Schedule for Affective Disorders and Schizophrenia – Present Version.9
- Crowd affiliation was self-reported using the Peer Crowd Questionnaire.7 Crowd affiliation was grouped into 3 categories:
  - High Status (popular, jocks/scholastic; n = 18, 24.9%)
  - Average Status (average, brains/nerds; n = 37, 49.3%)
  - Low Status (burnouts, alternatives, none/loner; n = 20, 26.7%)
- Eating Disorder Inventory-2: (1) drive for thinness (EDI-DT), (2) bulimia (EDI-B), and (3) body dissatisfaction (EDI-BD) subscales.10
- Beck Depression Inventory-4,4
- Importance of thinness was measured by asking: “How much do you believe that being thin will make your peers like you more or make you more popular?” Response options were: (1) not at all, (2) a little, and (3) a lot.
- Percentage of female friends perceived as engaging in disordered eating thoughts and behaviors was self-reported using the Behavioral Characteristics of Friendship Network.12

RESULTS
Separate ANCOVAs (controlling for BD scores) revealed that relative to girls in the average and low status crowds, girls in high status crowds reported:
(a) the highest ED-DT and ED-B scores (Fig. 1),
(b) the strongest belief that thinness is important for popularity (Fig. 2), and
(c) greatest amount of perceived disordered eating among friends (Fig. 3).

DISCUSSION
- Findings are largely consistent with previous research with community samples.2,3 This study suggests that girls in high status crowds might be particularly at-risk for ED symptoms, and therefore is an important group to target in prevention programs.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS
- The small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings.
- All participants were recruited from North America. Research replicating these findings with diverse populations is needed.
- Future studies should investigate the factors that influence the increased emphasis on thinness in high status crowds.
- Longitudinal research is needed to determine if reputation-based crowd affiliation is a predictor for or an associated feature of adolescent females with eating disorders.

REFERENCES

Prater presented at the 2012 International Conference on Eating Disorders, Austin, TX.

For more information, please contact the Weight and Eating Lab (WEL) at wel@sfu.ca