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"It really presents a struggle for females, especially my little girl": Exploring father's experiences discussing body image with their young daughters

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ABSTRACT

Body dissatisfaction in children, particularly young girls, is a growing concern around the world. The home environment can have a strong influence on children's well-being, and parents may contribute to their children's positive or negative body image development. Nearly all research on parent influence on body image has focused on mothers, leaving fathers' attitudes and experiences poorly-understood. To address this gap in the literature, we interviewed 30 fathers (*M*age = 40.30; *SD* = 7.48) of girls between the ages of 5 and 10 about the conversations they have with their daughters regarding body image. Through thematic analysis, we identified three primary themes: barriers to effective communication, combatting negative influences, and strategies for discussing body image. Fathers recognized the importance of talking about body image with their daughters, yet many did not feel confident or competent to do so effectively. They engaged in a variety of strategies to combat adverse cultural influences and encourage self-expression, character development, and mental and physical health in their daughters. However, messages about health were sometimes conflated with messages about thinness or food restriction. Implications for families and future research are discussed.

1. Introduction

Body dissatisfaction in young children is a growing concern around the world (Shriver et al., 2013; Tatangelo, McCabe, Mellor, & Mealey, 2016). While body dissatisfaction is not a gender-bound phenomenon, girls and women consistently report more concern about their appearance, weight, shape, and diet than boys and men their age (Davison & McCabe, 2006; Karazsia, Murnen, & Tylka, 2017; Phares, Steinberg, & Thompson, 2004; Tatangelo & Ricciardelli, 2017; Wood, Becker, & Thompson, 1996). Early childhood is a formative time for body image development; some studies indicate that children as young as three years old hold negative attitudes about their bodies (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2010; Tatangelo et al., 2016; Tremblay & Limbos, 2009), and some girls as young as five years old report thin ideal internalization (Kroon Van Diest, Perez, Smith, & Sladek, 2016; Perez, Kroon Van Diest, Smith, & Sladek, 2016), express negative attitudes about their own bodily appearance (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2010; Tremblay & Limbos, 2009), and engage in restrictive eating behaviors (Damiano, Paxton, Wertheim, McLean, & Gregg, 2015). Body dissatisfaction in childhood has been linked to a variety of adverse psychological and behavioural outcomes, and, critically, may also put children at risk for developing eating disorders in adolescence (Davison et al., 2003; McClelland et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding the social and environmental factors that contribute to the development of body image attitudes in young girls is a critical task for researchers.

Young girls' body image dissatisfaction and disordered eating attitudes are unsurprising in light of the cultural preoccupation with women's waistlines. Despite decades of backlash and protest, the thin ideal (i.e., the belief that the optimal body type for women is slim) remains a pervasive feature of Western society. While certain aspects of the ideal body have changed over time, thinness has been, and continues to be, a central component of the perceived ideal body shape for women in Western societies (Bozsik, Whisenhunt, Hudson, Bennett, & Lundgren, 2018; Calogero, Boroughs, & Thonmpson, 2007). Content analyses of popular media reveal that women's bodies are overwhelmingly

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depicted as thin and beautiful (e.g., Martins, Williams, Harrison, & Ratan, 2009; Slater, Tiggemann, Hawkins, & Werchon, 2012; Wasylkiw, Emms, Meuse, & Poirier, 2009), even in media geared toward children (Herbozo et al., 2004). Further complicating the matter, public health messages regularly conflate body size with health status (Mann, Tomiyama, & Ward, 2015; Puhl & Heuer, 2009), and myriad negative stereotypes are attributed to people, and women in particular, with fat bodies (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Himmelstein & Tomiyama, 2015).

Children are perceptive to cultural messages about the boundaries of societal body size acceptance. Although children seem to express favorable attitudes toward a wider range of body sizes than adults (Musher-Eizenman, Holub, Edwards-Leeper, Persson, & Goldstein, 2003), girls as young as 3–6 years old report anti-fat attitudes and prefer the appearance of thin bodies, compared to fat bodies (Harriger, Calogero, Witherington, & Smith, 2010; Holub, 2008; Meers, Koball, Oehlhof, Laurene, & Musher-Eizenman, 2011; Spiel, Paxton, & Yager, 2012), and many children hold negative implicit and explicit attitudes toward other children with larger bodies (Solbes and Enesco, 2010). While some companies have tried to promote a more realistic body image in children by creating dolls of varying body sizes (e.g., short, curvy), preschool girls consistently choose to play with thin dolls over fat dolls (Worobey & Worobey, 2014) and express more negative attitudes toward curvier dolls, compared to thin, short, and tall dolls (Harriger, Schaefer, Thompson, & Cao, 2019). Taken together, these findings suggest that cultural attitudes about bodies and fatness are absorbed by young children. It is therefore important for researchers to examine the messages young girls receive from sources close to them, such as the media, peers, and, important for this research, parents.ay an important role

1.1. Tripartite influence model and the influence of parents

The tripartite influence model of body dissatisfaction (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999) proposes three primary sociocultural influences on body image evaluation in adolescents: parents, peers, and media. The model suggests that direct and indirect messages from these sources can lead to appearance comparisons and internalization of negative body image commentary. The combination of these attitudes can impact body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness, as well as bulimia and self-esteem more broadly. The tripartite influence model has been tested and supported across diverse samples of adolescent girls (Keery, Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Papp, Urbán, Czeglédi, Babusa, & Túry, 2013; Shroff & Thompson, 2006) and boys (Stanford & McCabe, 2005).

Although parents generally consider body image to be a concern of adolescence rather than childhood (Hart, Damiano, Cornell, & Paxton, 2015), children's body image is uniquely influenced by the messages and commentary they receive from their families (Field et al., 2001; Tatangelo et al., 2016). It is well-established that abuse during childhood is a significant predictor of various mental health problems in adolescence and adulthood, including disordered eating and body image concerns (Dominy, Johnson, & Koch, 2000; Fosse & Holen, 2006; Hazzard et al., 2020). However, parents can also inadvertently play a part in the development of body and eating concerns in children by maintaining invalidating or rigid home environments (Cerniglia et al., 2017; Gonçalves, Moreira, Gonçalves, Vieira, & Machado, 2020) or by engaging in family conversations about weight, exercise, and body size. Specifically, when families place a strong emphasis on appearance, and particularly when parents encourage children to control their size or weight, girls report higher rates of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating attitudes and behaviors (Davis, Shuster, Blackmore, & Fox, 2004; Kluck, 2010). Further, a home environment characterized by parent dieting is predictive of body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls (Paxton, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006), and when parents engage in negative body talk about their children, those children report increased eating problems (e.g., binge eating, eating in secret, and overeating; Lydecker, Riley, & Grilo, 2018). Even well-meaning comments from parents to children about dieting and exercise can have an adverse effect on girls' eating behaviors and may ironically result in increased weight status in adolescence (Davison & Deane, 2010).

The majority of research related to parental influence on body image has focused on the role of mothers (e.g., Hart et al., 2015; Kroon Van Diest et al., 2016; Musher-Eizenman et al., 2003). This is reasonable, given that girls tend to feel closer to their mothers, compared to their fathers, and the mother-daughter relationship can play an important role in girls' mental health (Rabinor, 1994). Indeed, the mother-daughter relationship has been implicated in the development, maintenance, and treatment of eating disorders, and in studies assessing parent perspectives on eating disorders, the parent participants are overwhelmingly mothers (Beale, McMaster, & Hillege, 2005). Nevertheless, many family structures contain at least one father figure, and the type of relationship girls have with their fathers has important implications for girls' psychological well-being (Allgood, Beckert, & Peterson, 2012; Kelly, 2003), including eating attitudes and behaviors (Fitzgerald & Lane, 2000). Despite decades of calls for increased research attention (e.g., Kyriacou, Treasure, & Raenker, 2010; Maine, 1985; Wertheim, Martin, Prior, Sanson, & Smart, 2002), there is a paucity of research on fathers' role in their daughters' body image and eating disorder development.

1.2. The role of fathers in eating disorder development and prevention

While research is sparse, the extant literature suggests that fathers' (mis)treatment may negatively influence girls' body attitudes. Specifically, fathers' comments about their daughters' weight have been linked to young women's weight dissatisfaction and drive for thinness both in adolescence and at twenty-years follow-up (Keel, Heatherton, Harnden, & Hornig, 1997; Klein, Brown, Kennedy, & Keel, 2016). Further, in a qualitative study of 39 young women with anorexia nervosa, an overwhelming majority (92.3 %) of participants indicated that their fathers were "emotionally disengaged" and believed that this relationship contributed to the development of their condition (Maine, 1985). The father-daughter relationship also been implicated in the development of eating disorders in girls and young women (see Hooper & Dallos, 2012; Horesh, Sommerfeld, Wolf, Zubery, & Zalsman, 2014; Johnson et al., 2002), and fathers are often absent from the eating disorder treatment process (see Scarborough, 2019).

Other research, however, suggests that fathers can help establish positive body image and offset eating disorders in their daughters. For example, in a qualitative study of Swedish adolescents with positive body image, nearly half of the participants specifically noted that they had conversations with their fathers about body image (Frisén and Holmqvist, 2010). Further, in one study of 210 female students from two American universities, young women who did not maintain regular communication with their fathers were more likely to demonstrate anorexic behaviors, but young women who described their fathers as having open communication and compassionate conflict resolution styles reported fewer disordered eating attitudes and behaviors (Botta & Dumlao, 2009). Fathers who parent in an authoritative, rather than an authoritarian or absent, style have daughters with less drive for thinness and body dissatisfaction (Enten & Golan, 2009), and fathers' involvement and warmth has been linked to better treatment outcomes for young women in family-based treatment for

eating disorders (Le Grange, Hoste, Lock, & Bryson, 2011). Collectively, these findings suggest that fathers can play an important part in their daughters' body and eating attitudes, so fathers' perspectives and experiences discussing body image with their daughters warrant empirical investigation.

1.3. The present study

Although fathers may play an important role in the development of positive body image or prevention of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders in their daughters, their experiences speaking with their daughters about body image have heretofore not been subjected to empirical examination. Young children are influenced by their families and immediate home environments, and the first few years of a child's life serve as a critical period for the development of body image and eating attitudes. Therefore, the present study sought to explore fathers' attitudes about, and experiences discussing, body image with their daughters. Specifically, this research endeavored to address the following research questions: (1) How do fathers communicate messages about body image to their young daughters?, and (2) What do fathers need to make a positive impact on their young daughters' body image development?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 30 cisgender men (*M*age = 40.30; *SD* = 7.48) who had at least one daughter between the ages of five and ten. The majority of fathers who participated in the interviews were White (*n* = 29), and a majority of the daughters about whom they spoke were White (*n* = 27). One third of the fathers identified their current economic class as either working class or lower middle class (*n* = 10; 33.4 %), just over one third as middle class (*n* = 11; 36.6 %), and 30 % as upper middle class or upper middle class/wealthy (*n* = 9). The sample was well-educated, with 73.3 % (*n* = 22) having a bachelor's degree or higher. Regarding their relationship status, 86.7 % (*n* = 26) reported being currently married to their daughter's biological mother, 6.7 % (*n* = 2) reported being divorced from their daughter's biological mother, and one participant (3.3 %) reported being in a romantic relationship with someone other than their daughter's biological mother.

2.2. Materials and procedure

After securing IRB approval through the University of Missouri, we recruited fathers who had at least one 5-to-10-year-old daughter through email list serves at an American university in the Midwest and through fliers placed in family-friendly venues in the community (e.g., gymnastics clubs, libraries, etc.). Interested participants emailed the second author to indicate interest and received a return email with a brief survey to determine eligibility and gather demographic information. Those who qualified were contacted by email to schedule a semi-structured interview. Fathers were offered the option of a phone or Zoom interview to allow participants to choose which strategy was most comfortable for them in order to facilitate the disclosure of honest, potentially-sensitive information (see Novick, 2008). Fathers with more than one daughter in the age range were asked to choose one daughter to focus on for the duration of the interview.

Interviews were conducted by a graduate research assistant, who was pursuing a master's degree in social work. The research assistant was selected to conduct the interviews to mitigate the possibility that the authors' knowledge of the subject matter would bias the interviews, thereby potentially reducing the likelihood of socially desirable responding (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). Each conversation began with a brief greeting and an overview of the interview procedure. Participants were reminded that the interview would last between 30 and 60 minutes and that they could ask clarifying questions at any time. Interview questions covered a wide array of topics, such as positive and negative aspects of fathers' relationships with their daughters, fathers' attitudes about their own bodies, and daughters' observations about others' bodies. Participants also responded to prompts that encouraged them to recall conversations with their daughters and imagine how they would respond if their daughters stated that they wanted to look like people or characters with differing body sizes when they grew up (e.g., Elsa from *Frozen,* Ellen DeGeneres, Oprah Winfrey, Kim Kardashian). Participants were thanked and sent an online debriefing form following the termination of the interview. The interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, and participants were compensated with a $25 gift card.

2.3. Social location and positionality

As with all qualitative research, it is possible that a different set of researchers who sought to answer the same research questions may have extracted different themes from the data. Scholars have suggested that "we need to avoid the 'objectivist' stance that attempts to make the researcher's cultural beliefs and practices invisible" (Harding, 1987, p. 9), and by doing so, we increase our "objectivity" as researchers by revealing this information to the audience. As such, we situate this paper within the context of our own identities (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). The first author assisted with data coding and manuscript write-up. She is a PhD candidate at a Canadian university, and she identifies as a White, heterosexual, cisgender woman who has lived experience of an eating disorder and expertise in qualitative analysis. The second author is a White, heterosexual, cisgender Assistant Professor at a Midwest university with expertise in body image research, and is also mother to two children ages 6 and 10. The third author is a cisgender woman and PhD candidate at a Midwestern University. She identifies as a White and heterosexual. The graduate research assistant who conducted the interviews was a young, White, woman who was pursuing a master's of social work at the time of the interviews.

Throughout the project, we were attentive to the situated nature of knowledge creation (Ackerly & True, 2008). Rather than acting as the "invisible, anonymous voice[s] of authority" (Harding, 1987, p. 9), we negotiated our positions as both insiders and outsiders in the research process. Indeed, while we, as a team of women, were outsiders to the experiences of fatherhood, one of us was an insider to the experience of parenthood, and we are all insiders to a culture that stigmatizes individuals, and women in particular, with larger bodies (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Saguy, 2012). By working as both insiders and outsiders to fathers' experiences, we were able to analyze their responses without influence of our own *lived* experiences while leveraging our understanding of our shared *cultural* experiences.

2.4. Data analysis

We analyzed the data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2020). Thematic analysis is a "rigorous and systematic approach to coding and theme development" that is "creative, reflexive, and subjective" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 591). We specifically selected thematic analysis over other forms of qualitative analysis due to its inductive nature and methodological flexibility. Rather than a purely reflexive thematic analytic methodology, we employed a combination of reflexive and codebook thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Interviews were conducted and

Table 1
Table of Themes, Subthemes, and Operational Definitions.

Themes	Subtheme	Description
Barriers to effective communication	*Confidence*	Perceived inability to engage in difficult or uncomfortable conversations
	Gender differences	Awareness of the ways that being male differentiates them from their daughters
	Relationship quality	Fathers' recognition of daughters' levels of (dis)comfort discussing their bodies with them
Combatting negative influences	*Negative body talk*	Critical commentary about one's own or others' bodies
	Appearance praise	Cultural celebration of women's bodily appearance
	Media	Messages sent to daughters through depictions of women on television and in books
Strategies for discussing body image	*Character compliments*	Praise for daughters' skills, strengths, and talents
	Supporting self-expression	Accepting and validating daughters' decisions to present themselves how they wish
	"Health"	Framing conversations about body image around maintaining a healthy body weight or size

transcribed by a research assistant, and transcripts were sent to the second author and another research assistant, who reviewed them independently. Each researcher maintained reflexivity notes to capture their thoughts, feelings, and ideas about each interview as they proceeded through the coding (Pillow, 2003). The researchers then met to communicate their findings to one another and consensually agreed upon three primary themes. The researchers created a codebook for the rest of the research team, including a list of the themes and their operational definitions. A second research assistant then used the codebook to analyze the transcripts according to the agreed-upon themes, openly communicating questions and concerns to the research team. Following the initial round of coding, the third author revisited the coding scheme to extract potential subthemes embedded within the larger themes identified by the research team. The third author identified six key subthemes from the larger themes and, after discussion with the research team, recoded the data according to this revised coding scheme. The interviews and results were then sent to the first author, who, engaged in her own, independent reflexivity process. She reviewed the coding and suggested revisions to theme labels to reflect the experiences and attitudes of the sample. She also extracted three additional subthemes. The results of the thematic analysis are presented in Table 1.

2.5. Trustworthiness

When conducting qualitative research, establishing trustworthiness is of the utmost importance. We followed many of Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules's (2017) recommendations for qualitative analysis transparency. Prior to conducting any formal coding, the second author and research assistant kept notes of their thoughts, feelings, and initial themes that stood out through a process of memoing (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2007), and documenting their reflexivity process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). During the second round of coding, the third author reread each interview and the codebook in detail to establish a clear sense of the data and the coding up to that point (Nowell et al., 2017). As a means of triangulation, the anonymized interviews and coding scheme were sent to the first author, who asked clarifying questions about the themes and subthemes, helped to refine the coding, and assisted with identifying exemplary direct quotations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3. Results

Through the analytic process, the research team extracted three major themes from the interviews: *Barriers to effective communication, combatting negative influences,* and *strategies for discussing body image. Barriers to effective communication* refers to the aspects of the father-daughter relationship that served as obstacles to sensitive conversation about body image. Within this theme, we identified *confidence, gender differences,* and *relationship quality* as subthemes. The second theme, *combatting negative influences* emphasized the host of social obstacles the fathers had to overcome when talking to their daughter about body image. The three subthemes within this category included *negative body talk*, *appearance praise,* and *media.* The third theme, *strategies for discussing body image,* highlighted the various ways that fathers chose to speak with their daughters about body image. The main subthemes included *supporting self-expression, character compliments*, and *"health."* To maintain participant confidentiality, all names have been replaced with letters to differentiate speakers. See Table 1 for a full list of themes, subthemes, and operational definitions.

3.1. Barriers to effective communication

One of the major themes we extracted was *barriers to effective communication.* The fathers discussed aspects of themselves or their relationships with their daughters that served as challenges to meaningful discussion about body image. The three primary barriers we identified were *confidence*, *gender differences,* and *relationship quality*.

3.1.1. Confidence

Some fathers felt that, in order to have successful, sensitive conversations with their daughters, they first needed to establish a sense of comfort and confidence engaging in difficult discussions with their child. Participant L stated, "I think one of the big [issues] is just being comfortable and confident enough to do it. Like it's a conversation that needs to happen." Indeed, most of the fathers recognized the importance of conversations about body image, and many feared that they may make mistakes when attempting to have these formative discussions. For example, Participant G explained:

> There's a fear of saying the wrong thing. If you truly love your daughter and you want the best for her, and you want her to be whatever she's going to be and be the best dad, you want to make sure that you're one that they can trust and believe in and rely on. (Participant G)

Participants varied in their levels of comfort discussing body image with their daughters. While some had established strategies (sometimes in conjunction with their partners) to talk about body image with their daughters (see *strategies for discussing body image*), many expressed uncertainty about the best way to communicate about this topic, with several referring to these conversations as "awkward" (Participants L, P, J).

3.1.2. Gender differences

Many participants felt that *gender differences*, or the differential societal expectations and practical concerns facing women and men with regard to their bodies, added an additional layer of complication to discussions about body image. As Participant Y explained, "For me, personally, it's - I just don't have a lot of the same challenges that women do. I mean, there's not nearly the soci-

etal pressure on me to maintain a certain body that women do." A few men reported that learning more about the societal pressures facing women was "eye-opening" for them, such as Participant C:

> The eye-opening thing for me is talking with my wife—has just been how—I feel like, basically, compared to me, how much more this was a thing for her. . . It wasn't a thing I spent looking in the mirror as much time thinking about or comparing myself to my peer group as — and I mean, I don't know if this is nationwide true for females, but it was eye-opening to hear just how much that can preoccupy. (Participant C)

These fathers felt as though body image and appearance played a more salient role in the lives of women than men, so their fundamental and personal understanding of the topic was limited from the start. As men had no script for discussing body image with their daughters, many struggled to find common ground with them and to connect these conversations back to their own experiences.

Others noted that there were aspects of their daughters' developing bodies that they felt uncomfortable talking about with their daughters or that their daughters did not want to discuss with them. For example, when Participant T tried to talk to his daughter about training bras, "she was very embarrassed about it. She didn't want me to know what they were even though I knew what they were." When daughters did not want to have conversations with their fathers about their bodies, many fathers in this sample struggled to know how to appropriately respect those boundaries while still having these important conversations.

3.1.3. Relationship quality

When these and other complicated topics arose, fathers often referred their daughters to the girls' mothers. In fact, a challenge discussed by many of the fathers was the sense that their relationships with their daughters were not as close or "deep" (Participant Z) as their daughters' relationships with their moms. Several fathers expressed that their daughters typically sought out their mothers' guidance to discuss sensitive topics. As Participant T explained:

> I think she probably connects more with her mom with regards to talking about things about her [body] and that nature. I think with our relationship, it's probably more geared towards, I think, like things that she's interested in athletically, and then also we both enjoy watching television shows and talking about those things. (Participant T)

Participants often expressed that their daughters typically had "private conversations" (Participant T) with their mothers, rather than with them. Participant O emphasized how relationship quality and gender differences are intertwined when he noted, "I feel like I hear my wife having a lot of conversations about this with her; very intentional conversations because she's lived it. She's been in that same headspace." Some men felt as though this dynamic was appropriate, as the girls' mothers were more knowledgeable about these topics and could therefore provide more insight into the topic. Others, however, felt they could have successful conversations with their daughters about body image if given the opportunity.

3.2. Combatting negative influences

Another primary theme we identified in the interviews was *combatting negative influences.* We operationalized this theme as "challenges fathers face when trying to talk to their daughters about body image", and the subthemes included *negative body talk, appearance praise,* and *media.*

3.2.1. Negative body talk

One subtheme we extracted was negative body talk, or the tendency for fathers to comment negatively on their own bodies and express a desire to lose weight. Several fathers felt that their attitudes and comments about their own bodies may have subtly influenced their daughters' perceptions of their growing bodies. This idea was voiced by Participant T, who had recently gone on a diet, and he feared that his conversations about it may have had a negative effect on his daughter. He explained:

> Well, I think unfortunately, she's learned you know, probably a negative [body] image . . . because of what I've been trying to do the last year and a half, which is to lose weight that I put on. And so, I think that she hears me talk about me being fat or overweight. Then I think that kind of trickles down to her. (Participant T)

Participant E also recognized that his conversations about his body were starting to have an influence on his daughter. He noted:

> Now I'm trying to cut, I'm trying to lose body fat. And she doesn't really know what that means. She's just like, "Oh, I'm fat. I need to get my cut on." And it's like, *you don't even know what you're talking about*! But yeah, she notices things. (Participant E)

Some fathers were deliberate about hiding these conversations from their daughters, so as not to negatively influence their body image or eating attitudes, such as Participant N, who explained:

> When we talk about our bodies, we more talk about "Hey, we want to go and work out, so we can stay healthy. So, we can continue to be able to play when Mommy and Daddy are older." Whenever we talk about our bodies, or we talk about working out, my wife and I always try to exclude any type of talk about how our bodies look, or whether or not we're dieting to be thinner. (Participant N)

In fact, as will be discussed in the *strategies for discussing body image* section, shifting the conversation from dieting to health was a common tactic deployed by fathers to discuss staying active and eating nutritiously. However, some were more careful than others to avoid weight-stigmatizing commentary and framing of these behaviors.

3.2.2. Appearance praise

While some felt as though their own body attitudes had influenced their daughters, others recognized that their daughters were perceptive to the *appearance praise* they heard from their parents. Specifically, some of the fathers recognized that their daughters were hyper-aware about their mothers' cues about bodies and body image. Participant V recalled:

> I know my wife one time was talking with one of our neighbors, and they have a mutual friend who had just had a baby and lost all the weight really quick, and they were both commenting on, you know, how skinny and perfect she was already. . . I just remember [my daughter] kind of saying, you know, "Well - well, I want to be skinny and perfect, too." (Participant V)

Perhaps because the daughters often had closer and more intimate relationships with their mothers, the girls were particularly sensitive to their mothers' suggestions. Participants worried that when their daughters heard their mothers complimenting women on their thin bodies, their daughters picked up on cues that they, too, should strive to have a slim body.

Many fathers were conscious of the way they spoke about women's bodies, being careful not to engage in sexually objectifying discussions, such as Participant J, who commented:

> Öh, well, check her out. She's hot.T̈hat's not something that's going to come out of my mouth in front of her, talking to another guy in front of my daughter. Clearly, I may find somebody to be

attractive but that's not something that's going to come out of my mouth. (Participant J)

Participant F similarly explained that he tried to avoid inadvertently praising women's slender or sexual bodies, explaining, "your daughter sees what you value." By intentionally monitoring their appearance-related commentary about women, the fathers hoped to avoid negatively influencing their daughters' perceptions of their own growing and developing bodies.

Overall, fathers recognized that their daughters were listening to the comments they and their partners made about body image, and many purposely avoided engaging in conversation about other women's bodies in front of their daughters so as not to inadvertently communicate potentially-harmful messaging to their children.

3.2.3. Media

Fathers similarly expressed that the *media* was an important, albeit challenging, topic of conversations regarding body image. The fathers were aware of the influence that media had over their daughters and worried about the messages they were absorbing from books, television, movies, and other forms of media. Participant D explained:

> Everything [in the media] is almost to the level of propaganda, to some degree, that pushes that negative image. If you don't have that size three waist and so-on and so-forth; the cookie-cutter image that's put out there. It scares me because I see it really presents a struggle for females. . . especially my little girl, I don't think she's going to be that prototypical female. (Participant D)

Many fathers addressed these comments directly by monitoring their own language about celebrities to avoid being critical (i.e., avoiding *negative body talk*) or complimentary of their appearance (i.e., avoiding *appearance praise*), and by discussing media images of women specifically with their daughters. Notably, Participant T tackled these depictions head-on by explaining that media depictions of women were not realistic:

> I would think that's all on us as parents and being able to let her know, like I said earlier, you know, stuff on TV and if she's looking in magazines or YouTube videos or whatever the case may be, that that's not your norm. I mean these people are, you know, they get paid to do that. They have people that make them look that way and help them look that way. (Participant T)

Others combatted media pressures indirectly by providing their daughters with alternative heroes and role models to aspire to be like. One participant who shifted the conversation was Participant X, who intentionally showed his daughter media featuring a diverse range of body types:

> [My daughter] is a great reader of princess books, so she sees that body shape that's in there. I don't know that she's translated that as to a perfect image, but it's definitely an influencer. As we strive to find other things for her to read, because she is so avid, we definitely look for books that display people of different body types. (Participant X)

Overall, consistent with the Tripartite Model, fathers felt as though parental commentary and media messages could influence their daughters' body image development. However, fathers engaged in a range of strategies to shift the focus away from these negative messages.

3.3. Strategies for discussing body image

The fathers engaged in various types of discussion with their daughters about body image. It is worth noting, however, that fathers generally did not address their daughters' bodies directly, but were more inclined to *supportself-expression,* give *character compliments,* or frame their discussions around *"health."*

3.3.1. Supporting self-expression

While fathers generally eschewed conversations about their daughters' size or shape, several fathers expressed that they tried to validate their daughters' self-expression as a means of communicating positively with them about their bodies. For example, Participant R's daughter enjoyed "showing off" her clothes and hair, and her father was conscious about supporting her choices:

> She'll put together some crazy outfit, and then "Daddy, look at my outfit; I picked it out myself." And I go, 'You look great" . . . I try to support her trying to express herself, you know, with her hair and clothing. And if that's what makes her happy about [her body], then I'm going to support it. (Participant R)

By complimenting the ways that their girls chose to express themselves, the fathers sought to decentralize the role of thinness and beauty in their daughters' lives. In general, the fathers tried to praise the forms of expression that made their daughters happy. One father who was deliberate about this was Participant Z, who explained:

> If I do [compliment her], I compliment the outfit or something like, T̈hat outfit is cute,ör something like that. Even though I know both of my girls are beautiful, I know that that's also not a way I want them to be defined. (Participant Z)

Whether it was cutting their hair for charity (Participant Y) or wearing a costume for a "crazy movie" (Participant U), many fathers looked for opportunities to celebrate their daughters for their uniquepersonalities and means of self-expression.

3.3.2. Character compliments

Most of the fathers also communicated that they complimented their daughters on other traits (other than weight or shape-based compliments) as a way to deemphasize the role of appearance in their daughters' lives. Participant C put it plainly when he said, "I try to focus more on compliments that are more character-based versus appearance-based." In fact, several fathers reported giving their daughters compliments that were completely unrelated to their appearance. For example, Participant Z explained that, "I tell her how smart she is; how proud I am of her. That kind of thing. I try to stay away from physical compliments, I think." Other fathers provided similar responses to the prompt, such as Participant BB, who explained, "I tell her that she's beautiful, I tell her that she's smart, and that she's brave, and that she's kind, and that she's strong." While some fathers expalined that their compliments centered around character development, others mentioned that they deliberately supported their daughters' talents, such as Participant Y, who noted:

> I always try to be supportive of her when she's — in any way. Like the other day. She was singing, and I came into the room, she looked embarrassed. 'Why would you stop, honey?' She's like, 'I'm embarrassed.' I'm like, 'Don't. I love your singing. It's beautiful. It makes me happy to hear it.' (Participant Y)

While this strategy did not address body image directly, by intentionally highlighting the importance their daughters' skills, talents, and accomplishments, the fathers in the study aimed to draw attention away from their daughters' bodies and encourage them to take pride in parts of themselves other than their appearance.

3.3.3. "Health"

The final way that the fathers interviewed discussed body image with their daughters was through conversations about *"health."* When fathers framed conversations around health, they spoke about food, bodies, and exercise from a perspective of staying properly nourished and free from illness. Indeed, Participant U explained that, in all of his conversations with his daughter, "I try to steer her toward a healthy and happy life." Participant G similarly expressed:

> I literally would say, "You don't need to worry about that." Meaning, are you overweight or this or that. "That's nothing you need to be concerned with." Those are definitely literal things that I've said. . . I would specifically say something like, "That's not important. Having [a thin body] is not important. The most important thing is to be healthy and to be happy." (Participant G)

These conversations were often well-intentioned, yet fathers sometimes struggled to navigate between appropriate conversations about health and negative body talk. For example, Participant L expressed concern about his daughters' eating habits and worried about the types of food she was eating out of concern for her "health":

> So, she eats lots of crazy big desserts every night. If we don't watch her, she'll eat just like a huge bowl of ice cream every night . . . we talk to her about the importance of food and trying to stay away from like the - we don't want to say eating makes you fat; we want to stay away from those things, but like we try and stress the importance of nutritious foods. (Participant L)

Participant L's conflation of food, fat, and poor health was echoed by several participants. Other fathers explained that they provided examples to their daughters of people with fat bodies and encouraged them to eat healthy to avoid looking like them. Participant R noted:

> Being healthy is important, and the way that I look and the way that Oprah used to look aren't exactly healthy. So, I would hope that me and whatever this every-other-type-of-dad would try to steer their child toward looking more healthy than Oprah used to. (Participant R)

When discussing body image with their daughters, fathers often emphasized health over appearance. While this strategy was employed to avoid overtly weight-stigmatizing messages, these conversations sometimes drifted into disparaging comments about fat bodies. Although many fathers recognized that comments about appearance could have a negative influence on their daughters, it seems that some fathers were unaware that these types of conversations about food and "health" may ultimately have the same impact as explicitly commenting on their own, their daughters', or others' bodies. In fact, given the harmful and long-lasting impact of weight stigmatizing commentary, it is possible that these conversations about "health" could have potentially undermined the other thoughtful and creative strategies fathers employed to discuss body image with their daughters.

4. Discussion

Parents play a critical role in young children's body image development (Tatangelo et al., 2016); however, most research on this topic highlights the important work done by mothers, and little is known about the role fathers play in their daughters' body image development. In this study, we interviewed 30 fathers of young daughters to better-understand the ways in which they talk to their daughters about body image. In addition, we explored fathers' needs – what knowledge and skills would be beneficial for improving their impact on their daughters' body image development. We identified three main themes: (1) *barriers to effective communication;* (2) *combatting negative influences;* and (3) *strategies for discussing body image* from these data.

It is important to start with a discussion of the fathers' strengths related to influencing their young daughters' body image development. Overall, the fathers in the present study recognized body image development as a priority and actively sought ways to deemphasize the role of appearance in their daughters' lives. For example, the fathers talked about being intentional about how they talk about their own and others' bodies (see *appearance praise* and *character compliments*). One father specifically discussed how he actively seeks out media with diverse bodies (see *media*), which is important given research that suggests that young girls' social comparisons with women celebrities may be related to negative emotions (Tatangelo & Ricciardelli, 2017). Many fathers discussed how they intentionally try to focus their compliments on creative aspects of their daughters' appearance (e.g., how she put together an outfit) as well as tailoring their compliments to their daughters' character and not their daughters' appearance (see *supporting self-expression* and *character compliments)*. The fathers' deliberate avoidance of appearance-related commentary is supported by research that suggests that appearance-based comments, even when it is positive in valence, may have an adverse effect on body image (Calogero, Herbozo, & Thompson, 2009).

Unfortunately, despite the fathers' concern about their daughters' body image development and the positive steps many in the current sample took to encourage positive body image, we identified an alarming trend of anti-fat attitudes throughout their responses. This is not surprising, given the pervasive bias parents, and fathers in particular, have toward children living in fat bodies (Lydecker, O'Brien, & Grilo, 2018) as well as the universality of anti-fat attitudes and discrimination in Western society (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). While parents' conversations about weight and fatness may be well-intentioned, exposure to negative body commentary is a strong and consistent predictor of body dissatisfaction (see Mills & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2016). In fact, some research suggests that children living in fat bodies who experience anti-fat attitudes and weight bias have worse quality of life outcomes than children diagnosed with cancer (Schwimmer, Burwinkle, & Varni, 2003).

Several fathers in the current study conflated health with thinness (see *"health"* subtheme), which is unsurprising, given that even experts have not come to consensus on the most appropriate way to approach discussions about "healthy eating" with young children (see Hart, Damiano, Chittleborough, Paxton, & Form, 2014). According to Harrison (2019), one tenet of diet culture is that it "paints thinness and particular body shapes as markers of health and moral virtue" (p. 80) when, in fact, recent research suggests that weight stigma may have a larger impact on health than the type of food someone eats or their body size (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). Furthermore, some of the fathers in the current study discussed restricting their daughter's food intake; yet, parental restriction of their child's food intake has long-term, adverse implications. Rogers, Taylor, Jafari, and Webb (2019) found that the recall of restrictive and/or critical caregiver eating messages from childhood was related to more frequent negative self-body talk in the presence of family, which was partially mediated by higher levels of negative body image and heightened negative anti-fat attitudes. We strongly discourage fathers (and other parents, teachers, or guardians) from intentionally limiting young girls' access to food as a means of teaching them about proper eating. Below, we highlight potential alternative strategies fathers may wish to consider.

Some fathers also discussed how their own engagement with negative body talk and dieting may impact their daughter's body image. Again, fathers employed the tactic of couching their own dieting behaviors in a "health" context for their daughters. The

fathers in this study are right to be concerned about what they are modeling for their daughters, as research suggests parental weight talk and dieting behaviors may, in fact, contribute to the development of disordered eating behaviors (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010) and higher depressive symptomology (Bauer, Bucchianeri, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2013) among adolescent girls. Thus, conflating health with thinness as described by some of the participants in the current study may have an overall negative influences on their daughter's body image development.

Several fathers discussed the challenges that come with not sharing common ground with their daughters as they had not experienced pressures to achieve the thin-ideal in the same way their daughters (and their daughters' mothers) did (see *gender differences*). Consequently, many of the fathers spoke to not having the type of relationship with their daughters that lends itself to these conversations and, therefore, their daughters discussed sensitive topics mostly with their mothers (see *relationship quality*). However uncomfortable these conversations may be, research strongly suggests that parents play an important role in children's body image development (Tatangelo et al., 2016) and a fathers' influence may assist in the prevention of eating disorders (Botta & Dumlao, 2009). Thus, these conversations are critical, regardless of gender differences. One way for families to approach these sensitive topics is to have these conversations together. For example, they can discuss the principles of intuitive eating together at dinner or talk about the anti-fat attitudes they noticed in the children's movie they watched as a family. Having some of these conversations together may remind young daughters that both of their parents are approachable, and that beliefs about the inappropriateness of weight stigma are held by all members of the family. However, fathers should always respect their daughters' bodily boundaries. More research is needed on how fathers can effectively discuss boundaries and private, sensitive topics with their young daughters (see Hutchinson & Cederbaum, 2010).

4.1. Implications

Overcoming anti-fat attitudes in Western society where they are pervasive (Puhl & Heuer, 2009) is quite challenging. However, there are existing resources and paradigms that may prove beneficial to fathers and their families by reducing anti-fat attitudes and improving eating behaviors and body image. For example, intuitive eating (Tribole & Resch, 2012) offers a way of mindfully approaching eating for fathers and their families, and there is ample empirical evidence to support taking an intuitive, non-restrictive, and non-judgmental approach to food. For example, research suggests that intuitive eating is related to greater weight stability (Tylka, Calogero, & Daníelsdóttir, 2019), better psychological health, and less disordered eating behaviors (Hazzard et al., 2020). Research on families suggests that parental intuitive eating behaviors are related to feeding infants (Khalsa et al., 2019) and preschool-aged children (Tylka, Eneli, Kroon Van Diest, & Lumeng, 2013) with a responsive, and not restrictive, feeding style. Given the vast research supporting intuitive eating, fathers may wish to learn about and reference the pillars of intuitive eating when discussing food, bodies, and exercise with their daughters. Alternatively (though relatedly), parents may wish to familiarize themselves with weight-neutral or *health at every size* paradigms. These approaches decouple weight and health and encourage people to focus on "eating for well-being" and "life-enhancing movement," regardless of their weight or body composition (Bacon, 2010). One program that has shown promise in helping parents encourage healthful eating behaviors in children, as well as increasing children's body esteem, is the *Confident Body, Confident Child* program (Hart, Damiano, Li-Wai-Suen, & Paxton, 2019; Hill, Hart, & Paxton, 2020).

Schools, gyms, and fitness centers may wish to communicate the findings of our study to adults who spend time with children, such as parents, teachers, or coaches. Educators should specifically share how fathers can encourage their daughters' growth and development and shield them from the harmful impact of weight stigma by combating cultural forces such as negative body talk, appearance compliments, and appearance-centric media. These conversations should also emphasize that messages about weight stigma can appear in subtle ways, so parents should frequently reconsider how the discussions they have about a variety of topics – such as sports, hobbies, appearance, or food choices – may inadvertently communicate weight stigmatizing messages to their daughters. While adults may fear the "childhood obesity epidemic" (Puhl & Latner, 2007), it is critical that they seriously consider what messages are being sent to the children around them through the language they use to discuss food and bodies. Do these conversations remind children that all bodies are good bodies, or do they perpetuate the idea that thin bodies are "good" and fat bodies are "bad"? Are the adults in their lives communicating that they have a wide array of important skills, traits, and talents, or are they overemphasizing the importance of food and body size in children's lives? Does the discussion around "health" empower children to make informed choices about nutrition, or does it convey the importance of "food rules" (i.e., immutable regulations for how and when to eat) for children to follow? Education about how and when to have these conversations may help fathers feel more comfortable and confident discussing these important topics with their daughters (and other children).

4.2. Strengths and limitations

The current study helps to fill an important gap in our understanding of how fathers discuss body image with their young daughters. This study has a number of strengths that stand out. First, our sample size of 30 was adequate and fairly large, given that qualitative research typically needs only a small number of participants to address a research question (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Further, our interviews were rather long and addressed a variety of different topics, allowing participants to share their attitudes and experiences freely. Finally, given that a substantial majority of research on the role of parents in body image development has focused on mothers, this work moves the conversation forward regarding paternal influences in girls' body image development.

However, the present study is not without limitations, especially related to the primarily White, heterosexual sample. While the results presented in this manuscript relate to the types of conversations primarily White fathers engage in with their daughters, it is likely that fathers of Black daughters communicate about race, hair, and skin tone with their children (Awad et al., 2015; Capodilupo & Kim, 2014), while fathers of other races may discuss different body characteristics. Further, fathers in family structures where there is more than one father present may have different levels of closeness with their daughters, compared to fathers in family structures with a single mother and/or a single father. Furtherresearch is also needed to examine father influences on body image development for boys and gender-diverse children. Relatedly, future research should engage more diverse fathers and daughters, whose demographic features include more variety in (dis)ability, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and body size.

It is worth noting that the fathers who elected to participate in this study may have done so because they felt they had "something to say" about the conversations they have with their daughters. As such, it is possible that fathers who were particularly creative or conscientious about their conversations with their daughters are overrepresented in this sample. However, weight stigmatizing messages were present in many of these fathers' conversations with

their daughters, suggesting that even fathers who are eager to discuss their daughters' body image may inadvertently communicate harmful messages to their daughters. Further, it is possible that the men in our study may have responded in a socially desirable way. Indeed, it is unlikely that fathers would admit to blatantly criticizing their young daughters' bodies in an interview. We attempted to mitigate this risk by conducting interviews over the phone, rather than face-to-face, but it is possible that fathers still responded in ways they felt were appropriate for the interview. Regardless, we hope that fathers will employ some of the creative and compassionate strategies suggested by our research participants.

4.3. Conclusion

Fathers play a vital role in their daughters' body image development, and this study highlights some of the ways that fathers discuss body image with their 5-to-10-year-old daughters. Our findings suggest that fathers recognize the importance of these conversations but face numerous challenges to having these critical discussions. As fathers continue to fight an uphill battle against an appearance-centric and weight-stigmatizing culture through conversations with their daughters, we encourage them to support their daughters' skills, strengths, and talents, and avoid language around weight and body size.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Jaclyn A. Siegel: Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Project administration, Investigation. **Virginia Ramseyer Winter:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing - review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition. **Mackenzie Cook:** Formal analysis, Writing - original draft.

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