

# Media Images' Influence on Adolescent Girls' Self-Concepts

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Mead argues that the individual acquires a complete self by taking the attitude of the "generalized other" or whole community toward her- or himself but does not explain how the individual learns of that generalized attitude toward her or him. A strong case can be made that, in contemporary societies, the mass media are important sources of information about the generalized other. As this selection illustrates, the process through which the mass media influence individuals' self-concepts—their definitions and assessments of who and what they are—is a complex one. It suggests that media images exert their influence in two ways, through social comparisons and reflected appraisals. Social comparisons occur when an individual defines and evaluates herself or himself in relation to a reference group of similar people who share with her or him such current or desired social identities as ethnicity or future occupation. Individuals also define and evaluate themselves on the basis of what they feel others think of them, in terms of reflected appraisals. These are two aspects of what Cooley called "the looking glass self," of the reflected self-images we use to define ourselves. As this study demonstrates,

those reflected images are increasingly found on television screens and in the pages of popular magazines.

This study examines the influence of beauty images in girls' magazines and other mass media on adolescent girls' self-concepts. Melissa Milkie, the author of the study, surveyed and interviewed a variety of high-school girls about their uses and opinions of popular girls' magazines. Most of the girls reported reading and discussing those magazines, although white girls did so more often than African-American girls, and most criticized as unrealistic and unattainable the beauty images found in their advertisements and fashion pages. Yet, despite those criticisms, white girls still tended to judge themselves in terms of those images, although the African-American girls did not. Milkie explains this racial difference in terms of social comparisons and reflected appraisals. White girls considered the magazines for "girls like them" and compared themselves to the ideal beauty images in them despite their criticisms of those images. African-American girls, in contrast, did not consider that such magazines were for or about girls like them and so did not negatively compare themselves to the beauty ideals the magazines conveyed. Moreover, the white girls believed that "other girls" and "boys" evaluated their appearance in relation to the beauty images portrayed in those magazines and other media. In contrast, the African-American girls believed that other African-American girls and many boys found a much wider range of appearances attractive. In other words, while the beauty images of popular media influenced reflected appraisals of the white girls, the African-American girls discounted the influence of those images on those whose appraisals they took seriously.

This study demonstrates that while the mass media can affect our self-concepts, their effects are neither assured nor direct. Like the African-American girls in this study, some may simply conclude that the images the media convey are irrelevant to them. On the other hand, like the white girls, some may be critical of those images, yet believe others use them to judge others. In such cases, we imagine that others are

judging us in relation to those images and so compare ourselves to them. When those images are idealized and unrealistic, these social comparisons and reflected appraisals can have a devastating effect on self-esteem. Although indirect, the beauty images in popular girls' magazines and other media apparently had such an effect on the self-esteem of the white girls in this study. At least they considered themselves less attractive and had lower self-esteem than the African-American girls who did not negatively compare themselves to those images or believe that those whose opinions they valued did so.

This study also illustrates that what Mead called the complete self is never completed, but is continually subject to social influence and revision. The girls in this study were continually comparing themselves to others, evaluating themselves in terms of reflected self-appraisals, and revising their self-concepts accordingly. The African-American girls' more positive self-concepts do not indicate that they were immune to social influence, but that they took the attitude of a different generalized other than the white girls. While the white girls took the attitude of the generalized other expressed through the popular media toward themselves, the African-American girls evaluated themselves in comparison to other African-American girls and women and in terms of the assumed appraisals of the African-American community. Like the rest of us, neither group escaped the relentless influence of one or another generalized other on their self-concepts.

**Q**uestions of whether and how media influence self-concept—both self-identities and self-evaluations—as well as their impact on beliefs, values and behaviors underlies much media research. . . . In this study I . . . [analyze] the extent to which people's power to make critical assessments of [media] content (for example, believing that stereotyped portrayals of one's group are unrealistic or unimportant) may prevent that content from negatively affecting the self. I take the case of

feminine beauty images in media, and assess the relative power of critical interpretations in countering harmful effects on the self-concept, specifically on self-esteem. To clarify how media can affect people indirectly, I draw on basic principles in social psychology which point to the key role of *others* in self processes, and discuss these in terms of some unique properties of mass media. . . .

### How Media Affect the Self: Incorporating Social Psychological Principles

A unique quality of media is their public pervasiveness and people's knowledge that the images or ideas they see are also seen by many others—often millions of others. In addition, individuals believe that *others are more strongly affected* by media portrayals than they themselves are (Davison 1983; Perloff 1993). This belief reflects either a misperception of how others view or are influenced by media or, as Davison (1983) points out, perhaps an underestimation of the media influence on the self. Evidence for this belief—known as the “third-person effect”—includes studies showing that people believe that other people's children are affected by commercials more strongly than their own, and that others in their communities are affected by political campaigns more strongly than they are (see Davison 1983; Perloff 1993).

How does a belief that media images are powerful for others matter for individuals? The third-person effect suggests that effects of media in which the content *directly* influences the self, attitudes, or behavior may not be the only important kind of influence. A complex, indirect effect may also occur as people account for the effects of the pervasive imagery in media on others in their social networks, *and are themselves influenced by perceptions of the way others see the media-distorted world*. Much of what we know and understand about others outside our community—who they are, what they value, indeed,

what is happening in the broader society—is filtered through the distorted lens of the media; and for some, this information may even come to represent the society (Altheide and Snow 1988). Indeed, media may have become a significant part of the generalized other—that is, the “society” we know—whose views we take into account in understanding and evaluating our self. Because media effects may involve how we believe *others* see such images, self processes involving significant others—specifically social comparisons and reflected appraisals—must be considered.

Social comparisons affect how we learn about and see ourselves in relation to individuals, groups, or social categories. Are we the same or different? Better or worse? Social comparison theories suggest that we tend to compare ourselves with similar others, though we have selectivity in making such comparisons, that is, relative freedom to select the referents by whom we evaluate ourselves (Rosenberg 1986; Singer 1981). Theoretically, given freedom of comparison, people could use selectivity to escape media images that they dislike or to which they compare negatively—by ignoring or discounting them and by not using such images as a basis for social comparison. Yet because of the pervasiveness of media, and the way in which people believe that media affect others, it may be difficult to avoid some social comparisons with media images and felt evaluations (reflected appraisals) based on the media-depicted world. Media images may alter ideas of what is normative or ideal or of what one thinks *others* believe is normative or ideal, while offering an additional pervasive standard of comparison that goes beyond local cultures. If people believe that others use such images to evaluate them, they cannot simply shift away from this constraining comparative referent.

Reflected appraisals, or how people believe that others view them, can further explain the indirect impact of media. . . . At least two areas of research on reflected appraisals are important for understanding media im-

pact. First, research shows that people cannot easily distinguish how a particular significant other views them. Instead, reflected appraisals appear to be a proxy for the generalized other—the attitudes of an entire group (Felson 1989). Given the place of media in representing society's (generalized others) norms and ideals, it is crucial to consider how media relate to the self via reflected appraisals.

Second, it is essential to consider the relevance and importance of reflected appraisals. Rosenberg (1986) cautions researchers to examine the conditions under which reflected appraisals in fact will affect the self. Ultimately those reflected appraisals must be important to the individual in order to exert influence. For example, Rosenberg argues that a racist society does not simply cause a negative impact on black children's self-esteem because black children are not necessarily aware of others' (whites') views, may not agree with them, may not find them relevant to the self, or may not care about the opinions of those others. Similarly, people might be affected (indirectly) by media images only when they believe that those important to them are so affected. The theoretical and empirical research on social comparisons and reflected appraisals is important in considering how media criticism could be deflated. Even if someone believes that her group is portrayed unrealistically and does not like the portrayal, she may not know or believe that others *share* her criticisms. In other words, individuals see themselves through the eyes of others who they assume have been affected significantly by mass media imagery. It is clear that people ignore, dislike, and belittle media portrayals, and may not wish to make a social comparison that is negative for the self. Yet the extent to which such critical assessment of media is effective, or can negate effects, may depend on the extent to which individuals know that significant others have assessed the symbols critically in the same way. . . . Alternatively, peers may be a means of validating critical assess-

ment if the peer network also is critical of such portrayals *and* if the individual knows the views of that group accurately. In such a case, an individual can act on criticisms, or they can be meaningful in protecting her self-evaluations, because she knows that the network or group devalues those images as well.

### Analytic Strategy and Research Questions

... I examine the case of pervasive beauty ideals disseminated through mass media, which many suggest are harmful to young women. These images, particularly in regard to body shape, are extremely unlike "real" American women. The gap between the image and the reality has grown in recent years, as the media images have become slimmer and Americans have grown heavier (Wiseman et al. 1992). The in-depth interviews focus on a tangible, explicit embodiment of idealized femininity—girls' magazines—which saturate their target audience (Evans 1990). The images presented therein are also pervasive in other media such as movies and television. I address these broad research questions: How do girls interpret the female image in media, how do they critique it, and how do they perceive its influence? How do girls view peers' interpretations of these images? How important are critical views of the imagery in protecting girls' self-esteem?

### Data and Method

The data come from in-depth interviews with a subsample of 60 girls who were part of a larger survey. . . . I obtained permission from the principals of two high schools to conduct the study, and from grade 9 and grade 10 teachers to gain access to their classrooms. To examine how media interpretations might vary by ethnicity and locale, I chose an ethnically diverse urban high school and an all-white rural high school in the mid-

west. This choice of schools allowed comparisons of whites' interpretations of popular national media images across localities, and permitted a comparison of ethnic groups in a single locale . . .

Of the 60 girls interviewed, 49 were white and 11 were minorities (10 African-American and one Asian-American). About two-thirds were interviewed individually, and the remainder in groups of two (and, in one case, three) friends. The interviews took place in a private room during the subject's study hall or lunch period, or during a class period in which a teacher had approved her absence . . .

### Results

Ethnic status sharply differentiated whether girls identified with the images, supposedly intended for and about all adolescent girls. This status created an important filter for social comparisons and reflected appraisal processes, and thus influenced the effectiveness of critical interpretations for shielding harm to self-concept. First I discuss how the magazines and the images they contain were a part of white girls' culture at both the rural and the urban school, but how black girls generally rejected the images as part of their reference group even though they occasionally read popular girls' magazines. Both white and black girls interpreted the images as largely unrealistic; many wanted more normal or more "real" girls in the images.

Next I show that theoretical work on social comparisons and reflected appraisals helps to explain how critical interpretations of media do not necessarily preclude effects of media. Social comparisons with the images were distinguished strongly by ethnicity, with variations in the desire to emulate the images. Even though the white girls compared themselves negatively with the images and felt poorly about themselves in relation to the ideal, they felt it difficult to opt out of such a comparison. The utility of the criti-

cisms relates to reflected appraisals, demonstrating the limitations of "resistance" when media images are presumed to affect significant or generalized others.

### Reference Groups, Media Interpretation, and Criticism of Images

Explicit in cultural products labeled *Seventeen* or *Teen* is the notion that such products provide images and information relevant to particular groups of people. . . . In interviews, the white girls clearly indicated that they regarded the images as directed toward *adolescent girls*. Much of the content directly advises or discusses issues pertaining to females, and the girls' responses indicated their understanding that femininity was central in these cultural products.

Girls' magazines, like other media, were part of the white girls' peer culture in both schools. They helped these girls to assess how well they fit into, or were similar to, their reference group. . . . The magazines gave advice on, and were perceived to help with, girls' concerns about "fitting in" and being accepted by others. In the interviews, for example, many girls stated that any hypothetical girl who does *not* read girls' magazines does not care about others' opinions or is very independent. This comment implies that the information contained in these media pertains to conforming to the "norm" of adolescent femininity.

The respondents considered reading the magazines an enjoyable leisure activity: 95 percent of the white girls surveyed read them occasionally or more often; more than half read them "always." Magazine reading as a part of peer culture, and the relative amount of interaction centered around the cultural products themselves, differed somewhat in the two locales. At the rural school, where girls made slightly higher use of the imagery and evaluated it more positively, cliques regularly discussed content during school hours and after school over the telephone. They

read the magazines in the lunchroom, the hallways, and the school library, and even during class. Subscribers often shared their magazines with friends, reading them either together or to each other, and passing on copies to those who did not subscribe. Indeed, for rural white girls, a great deal of peer interaction surrounded these magazines. This is not surprising because in rural areas, media may be an important means of understanding the larger world and the variety of people in it, with which the rural dwellers have much less contact.

Urban white girls also said they discussed the magazines or particular items in the magazines with friends, but they reported this experience less often. Perhaps because more varied activities are available to the urban girls, magazine reading is less salient. Yet in a quantitative analysis examining how often white girls read the magazines alone or with friends, I found no differences between schools. Indeed, more white girls at the urban school than at the rural school subscribed to at least one girls' magazine (64 percent versus 50 percent).

Black respondents less often read mainstream girls' magazines, both individually and as a collective activity: 86 percent of the black girls surveyed read them at least occasionally, but only 11 percent always read them. Even though, in recent years, black models have appeared regularly in the four magazines with the greatest circulation, the magazines are perceived as largely for white girls. Most of the black girls read *Ebony* or *Essence*, aimed at black adults and black women respectively, magazines about music directed toward black youth, and hairstyle publications. Thus, in contrast to white girls, these respondents largely regard mainstream girls' magazines as something they do not want to or should not orient themselves toward because they view the magazines as for and about white girls. They define the images as irrelevant to their reference group for this social aspect of the self. . . . Tanya, in respond-

ing to how people would understand "girls" if they had only girls' magazines to look at, said:

I think this is mainly toward . . . white females . . . you really wouldn't see too many black people in here—so if this is all you saw, you'd be kinda scared when you saw one like me or something. (May 9, 1994; urban black girl)

Minority girls were quite critical about the realism of the images. Part of this critique was that normative adolescent femininity was portrayed as white femininity. Although ethnicity differentiated the respondents' use of these mainstream magazines, both African-American and white girls seemed to hold common perceptions about the unreality of the images.

When asked to describe the magazines to a girl who had never seen them, most of the respondents interpreted them as conveying very traditional aspects of femininity, such as appearance and romance. They mentioned fashion, makeup, styles—all related to appearance—and relationships with males. . . . Barb's explanation is similar to how most girls described the magazines:

They're about how girls can do their hair, what's in fashion. They give advice on boys; sometimes they give you advice on your body and stuff like that—how to get in shape. They've got how to do your makeup right, hair—I think I already said that—what's the right jewelry. They talk a lot about stars and stuff like that, they also talk a lot about boys. (May 9, 1994; urban Asian girl)

Secondarily, the respondents reported that the magazines were about girls' "problems." This view is closely related to the above observation. The information presented about appearance and relationships with boys was interpreted by the girls as advice about problems of traditional femininity which they were experiencing or which were common to adolescent females. A minority of the girls described the magazines more

broadly as about "teenagers' lives" or "everything." Only two of 60 respondents described the magazines in what might be considered feminist terms, as about girls' "being independent," although these two girls also discussed appearance as an important component of the magazines.

The great majority of the respondents, even those who seldom read the magazines, liked them as a whole or liked certain parts. The girls stated that they read them because they were interesting, entertaining, and informative. An important feature of the girls' enjoyment and interest was learning about themselves and assessing their lives and their problems in relation to their peers. Linda, a grade 9 student, explained this:

The girls will write in, and you kind of realize they have the same problems as you do . . . you know they [other girls] kinda make you feel like you're not the only one. (May 19, 1994; urban white girl)

Researchers have suggested that one reason why people are critical of media is that the media distort reality and reflect groups in distorted ways. Most of the respondents were critical in that they said media images of girls were not realistic at all, and they made negative comments about the lack of "normal" girls. In general, the respondents indicated that the feminine images in the magazines presented an unrealistic appearance, both in the styles of clothing and in the perfection of their faces, hair, and bodies in comparison with the largely imperfect local girls. A few respondents said that the girls in the magazines were somewhat realistic; sometimes, they referred to the pages that focused on "real" girls' problems or compared the images with the most popular or most beautiful girls in the school. The black girls were quite critical of the magazine models' physical appearance in general and tended to be critical about the lack of ethnic diversity or representation.

In discussing how the models looked, the respondents were likely to comment that

they were *too* perfect, especially in body shape, weight, hair, facial features, and complexion. Sandra, a grade 10 student, discussed the message sent by the magazines:

They mainly focus on models . . . they make them look perfect, which nobody is. Makes everyone's expectations really high of their self, and they don't need it. I don't think they show the true girl. You know, nobody is perfect, and they all have their mistakes, and some of these people look like they never make a mistake. (April 21, 1994; rural white girl)

In fact, many viewed the images not merely as unrealistic, but as artificial. A girl who had recently lost a good deal of weight remarked that some models shown in the magazines have altered their "true" selves:

I think some of them might be fake. Like get contacts to change their eye color, cake on their makeup, starve themselves. Like they're really not that skinny, but they just starve themselves. (May 25, 1994; urban white girl)

Generally, the respondents disliked the fact that these pervasive media images deviated so much from reality. They remarked, as noted above by Sandra, that the media created an uneasy gap between image and reality. Barb, while looking at the title of a girls' magazine article in front of her, observed that even the so-called "problem" bodies shown in the magazines are perfect:

Oh, if I read that "Four Weeks to a Better Body," I'd probably . . . these magazines are trying to tell you "Do this and do that." Sometimes they have . . . swimsuits and stuff, and what you can do if you have a problem body. If you got a big butt, big chest . . . what to do. And these girls that they are showing don't have that problem. I mean you can tell they don't, and that makes me mad. . . . They say if you got a stick figure, wear a one-piece and . . . colorful and I'm looking at the girl and she doesn't have a stick figure. If you

got big hips, if you got a big stomach—she doesn't have it—you can never understand that. (May 9, 1994; urban Asian girl)

In response to open-ended questions about whether they would change anything about the magazines, particularly anything that was emphasized too much or was not included, more than one-third of the respondents specified that the magazines should change the feminine image to be more realistic or "normal." Amy believes that "normal" people are missing from the images:

One thing I guess would be just more normal people . . . not like the models, but just average. Other people that haven't really had modeling experience. (May 25, 1994; urban white girl)

Similarly, Suzanne suggests that magazine editors should be more realistic:

Probably tell them to be more realistic about the situations, and who they have in their magazines . . . people that are everyday teenagers, not just celebrities and people like that. (May 20, 1994; urban white girl)

The majority of the girls indicated that the unrealistic images were a problem for themselves, and/or for some, most, or all girls. Leslie, who had discussed her "underweight" friends' concern about eating anything fatty, said:

If all you ever see is all these people with the perfect teeth, the perfect complexion, with a skinny body, then they may not think that they're perfect and then they start to worry about being skinny and getting braces, wearing lots of makeup to cover up their face. (May 25, 1994; urban white girl)

Similarly, Brittany discussed what she would tell the editors of girls' magazines:

To quit stressin' so much that you need to be so skinny for bathing suits and stuff 'cause it just makes teenagers feel bad

about themselves. (May 2, 1994; rural white girl)

In sum, most of the respondents regarded media images of females, particularly those which are common in ads or fashion pages, as unrealistic. Many disliked the images for this reason, considered them harmful to themselves or to others and advocated that media producers should alter their products to include more "real," ordinary, or "normal" girls.

### Media and Social Comparison Processes

Social comparison theories argue that we compare ourselves with similar and nearby others, and that social structural factors influence which referents will be chosen. Although researchers generally suggest that we are motivated and free to make comparisons that are favorable to us (Rosenberg 1986; Singer 1981) there are limits; comparisons that disfavor us may be unavoidable if we cannot leave a group. . . . This point may help to explain how cultural images of one's reference group, although rarely considered in social comparison research, may constitute an inescapable "group" that can have negative consequences as it is incorporated into local culture. Insofar as one views media "others" as attractive and identifies with them as they are brought into one's peer group, they may become comparative referents, although such comparison to images is likely to have negative consequences for the self. In this section, I discuss how the mainstream female image, although most respondents view it as unrealistic and criticize it, becomes an oppressive negative referent for whites who cannot escape it easily, but not for blacks, who feel distant from it.

Both the white and the African-American respondents, but especially the white girls, liked the magazines, even though they criticized the lack of realism of the girls pictured therein. The white respondents used the images and ideas in the magazines to assess

themselves. They said frequently that they "felt better" or more normal when reading about the problems and experiences of other girls their age. This feeling came from the numerous articles and advice columns that dealt with problems of relationships with boyfriends and family members, peer group pressures, and health, beauty, and fashion issues. The respondents particularly liked to assess themselves in relation to their reference group by taking quizzes that evaluated them on topics such as relationships (e.g., "How Good a Friend Are You?"). These quizzes provide scores that categorize the reader as a certain type of person and explain how she tends to act in situations in comparison with others. Jackie explains why she reads the magazines:

I guess I like to see what . . . the clothes, like what people are wearing. And like questions-answers, like what people are . . . curious about, and see if I'm the same, I guess. (May 23, 1994; urban white girl)

The respondents often told how they learned about themselves through other girls' problems or experiences discussed in the magazines, and thus about how they compared with their peers on adolescent issues that were often troubling developmental concerns, such as sexuality. Many girls appreciated the magazines for helping with their problems. Yet just as the white girls sought to learn about and evaluate themselves in reference to their "media peers'" emotions, problems, behavior, and experiences, they did so with their media peers' physical appearance, though with less enthusiasm. The ordinary girls featured in the text and the atypical professional models featured in the accompanying pictures are very different types of media peers; perhaps this coexistence of "real" girls with problems (in the text) and "ideal" girls (pictured) makes the comparison to beauty images even more likely and leads to negative self-evaluations. Because of their perception that these images, however distorted,



constituted others' views of adolescent femininity, the white respondents could not easily opt out of a social comparison and self-evaluation in which they were sure to fall short. . . .

Social comparison theories assume some degree of freedom in choosing comparison referents; such choices are presumed to be partly governed by motivations for self-enhancement (Singer 1981; Rosenberg 1986). Yet the girls who saw the images as unrealistic and disliked this nonrealism, and for whom comparisons would not invite self-enhancement, nonetheless made comparisons. The great majority of white girls wanted to look like the ideal girls featured in the magazines, connecting such imagery to rewards such as male attention, and inevitably compared themselves with the "perfect" girl. Beth indicated why "everybody" wants to be like this:

They're so beautiful and everything and they have these really great bodies and they have the perfect hair, the perfect boyfriend, the perfect life, and they're rich and everything. (April 25, 1994; rural white girl)

Similarly, Amber explained how she believed the magazines influence girls:

I think they, just girls in general, kind of want to be like the girls in there. Like the models. I think they want to be like those models . . . [because] they think if they're like that they're gonna get lots of guys and stuff. (April 28, 1994; rural white girl)

Although the vast majority of white girls appeared to use the information and images as a reference group with which they identified and whose physical appearance they emulated, four respondents stated that they did not want to change themselves to be like anybody else. For example, Beth, who commented about what "everybody wants," said:

Well, everybody wants to be a model but . . . I just like myself as myself. I wouldn't

really . . . change anything about myself. (April 25, 1994; rural white girl)

The minority respondents, in sharp contrast, did not emulate these images nor compare themselves as negatively with the models. Even though most of the black girls occasionally read the mainstream publications, they considered the images less relevant, belonging to "white girls' " culture and not part of a reference group toward which they oriented themselves. Strikingly, 10 of the 11 minority girls (nine black and one Asian-American) said unequivocally that they did not want to be like these girls; one mixed-race respondent (African-American and white) said that she "sometimes" did. The black girls indicated that they did not relate to the images and did not wish to emulate the rigid white beauty ideal. Tamika described why she generally did not read mainstream girls' magazines:

Well, I don't see a lot of black girls. . . . I don't see a lot of us . . . maybe if they had more, maybe I could relate to that. I don't know. 'Cause obviously we can't wear the same makeup or get our hair the same way . . . things like that. So maybe if they had more. (May 11, 1994; urban black girl)

In sum, for the great majority of white girls in both locales, national media images and information about the reference group served as an additional social comparison introduced into the local context. The white girls evaluated their own behavior, problems, emotions, and importantly, physical appearance in comparison with these media others. Even though they knew that the images were unrealistic, the white girls saw themselves as part of the reference group being portrayed, and compared their "problems" with adolescent females' problems. They reported that they often (reluctantly) made social comparisons with the perfect physical appearance of media images because they knew that these images were what "everybody" wants. The mi-

nority respondents and a very few of the white respondents did not emulate these feminine images in media, did not bring them meaningfully into peer groups, and seemingly did not make social comparisons unfavorable to themselves. . . .

Although the white girls liked the magazines a good deal and enjoyed finding out that they were "normal" on the basis of other girls' behaviors and problems, many said that they personally or that "girls" in general felt abnormal and inferior in relation to the idealized feminine image. A key influence of the magazines, then, is that the great majority of white respondents said they wanted to look like the girls pictured therein, *even though most saw the images as unrealistic and unattainable*. These girls necessarily experienced relative deprivation because they could not attain the valued image promoted by the pervasive display of this unique part of the reference group. Although they generally understood that the images were unrealistic, the girls perceived that other girls in the school, and especially males, valued such an appearance. Thus it was difficult for critical appraisal of media images to become meaningful in local interaction, a phenomenon that I discuss below.

A rural white respondent, Patty, demonstrated the complexity of being aware of nonrealism and critical of images, while simultaneously striving to achieve such an appearance. She indicated that the magazines influence girls "quite a bit," and explained that they did so by making girls, including herself, feel as if they wanted and *needed* to look like the media portrayals:

[Girls are influenced by magazines] . . . by havin' to look that way. I mean by their body and stuff 'cause they're all really tall and skinny so everybody tries to be all really tall and skinny. . . . I think most girls don't realize that they're bigger boned than [that] . . . I'm [from a] very big-boned family . . . most girls just don't realize that there's *no way* in the world they could

look like that. (April 22, 1994; rural white girl; respondent's emphasis)

Patty underestimated the degree of critical assessment by girls: most respondents *did* realize that they could not attain the look. Similarly, Alana, a tall, slim 15-year-old who had been recruited by a modeling agency, said that she and others felt as if they should measure up:

The thing with being skinny—you think sometimes "Maybe I should be skinny too." But then you sit back and you're thinking, "Oh my God . . . what am I thinking—thinking that I'm going to be perfect like one of them." But there's a lot of girls, like I said, that get into that—they try to be all of that. (May 12, 1994; urban white girl)

The white respondents made negative social comparisons even while they recognized the media distortion. They indicated that the comparisons were difficult to opt out of and made them or "girls" feel worse about themselves because the girls inevitably looked worse than the glamorized exceptional females in the media. In . . . data from the larger group of girls surveyed ( $N = 210$ ) the white girls felt significantly worse about themselves compared with the images . . . than the minority girls. . . .

The black girls' criticisms of media imagery, in contrast to the white girls', may be effective in reducing the impact of media in this case, because the black subculture as a whole is more critical of mainstream beauty ideals. The black girls in this study, although as concerned about appearance as the white respondents, perceived themselves as better-looking and were more satisfied with their appearance than were the white girls, and their self-esteem was higher. Though the black girls objectively are farther from the mainstream ideals of beauty in skin color, hair style, and weight . . . they compared themselves more favorably with mainstream media images than did the white girls. Evi-

dence from interviews also indicates that black girls perceived the white ideal as narrow or as less applicable to them. Eliza discussed how minority girls may strive less often to be like the images of girls shown in these magazines:

This is kind of a stereotype, but more of my white friends than my black friends are into [trying to be like feminine images in magazines]. I mean a lot of them are going on a diet or "I want that body so bad"—I don't know how anybody can be like that. (May 27, 1994; urban black girl)

Lakoff and Scherr (1984) suggest that ethnic minority women, although evaluated by whites as inferior in relation to a model of white beauty which is impossible for them to achieve, currently may consider a *wider* range of looks as beautiful or normal within their subculture. They cite black women's magazines: Although these publications advertise hair straighteners (for a more mainstream model of beauty), they also show a wide variety of African facial features when demonstrating hair styles, as well as a range of body types, with information about how to "get bigger" as well as smaller (Lakoff and Scherr 1984). Indeed, *Essence*, a magazine targeted to African-American women, received a media award for its more realistic portrayal of females, including its depiction of a wider variety of body shapes (Chambers 1995). . . .

Although the black girls surveyed as part of the larger study . . . felt that they were significantly better looking than white girls and were more satisfied with their looks overall . . . the interviews indicated a good deal of concern and dissatisfaction about hair, which the girls felt must be altered from its natural state for a more "beautiful" look. Indeed, hair straighteners are advertised in the very publications directed to black women which have been praised for their wide variety of body shapes and facial features.

As the above analysis shows, the effects of media imagery are complex. Social psycho-

logical work on reference groups and social comparison processes can help to elucidate how the consequences of pervasive media images vary for girls of different ethnicities. Social comparison research suggests that we compare ourselves with similar others, and although media images generally have not been examined as part of reference groups, it is likely that people shown in the media may serve this function for self assessment (Snow 1983).

The data reported here show that a peer group depicted through media can be an important social comparison group, even though it creates negative consequences for self-evaluation. In addition, the freedom to *select* this comparison referent may be limited. The relative freedom of choosing similar others to compare oneself to for self-enhancement purposes, as suggested in research on social comparison (see Singer 1981), is shown to be very restricted in this case. Rather, the public pervasiveness and the esteemed, glamorized position of these "perfect" female peers apparently restrict white girls' ability to ignore or downplay this comparison despite its negative consequences. Indeed, because the images are presented in a variety of media formats such as television, magazines, film, and the Internet, the impact of the images may be much more powerful. . . .

It was striking that the urban white girls' interpretations of the images and their beliefs about the place of those images in others' eyes were more similar to the rural white girls' interpretations and beliefs than to those of their black urban classmates. The black girls in this integrated school did not report that the mainstream model of female beauty was relevant to them, and thus did not generally compare themselves unfavorably with these media peers. As Rosenberg (1986) points out in his study of black and white children's self-esteem—blacks generally made comparisons within their own group, not with whites, on aspects of self-evaluation such as physical appearance. Similarly, the black girls studied here reported that the media figures with

whom they identified were black performers, not white or "whitened" models; the performers had a wide range of appearances, and the girls did not appear to compare themselves negatively with these women.

In sum, although many white girls understood that the images were unrealistic, and although they disliked the anxiety-producing gap between their own physical appearance and a media-generated ideal, they still desired such an appearance, attempted to attain it, and felt bad when they did not measure up to the media image of femininity. Some of this lack of efficacy in the white girls' critical interpretations, due to continued negative social comparisons, may be explained by reflected appraisal processes.

### **Reflected Appraisals: How Media Images Can Affect the Self Indirectly**

Research suggests that reflected appraisals may be a proxy for the perceived attitudes of a generalized other rather than for perceived views of particular others (Felson 1989). This finding helps to explain how media images may affect us indirectly insofar as they are an important part of the generalized other; indeed, as I explain in this section, media images may represent society's views. In addition, research on reflected appraisals points to the relevance and importance of these perceived attitudes toward us, and our agreement with these attitudes as mediators of reflected appraisals' impact on the self (Rosenberg 1986). This phenomenon explains the variability in the power of critical interpretations of media. For whites, beliefs about how important others—white peers—consider these images may thwart their own power to meaningfully express criticism. For blacks, this "white" generalized other is less relevant, and the evaluations of those who find the image desirable are less important; thus critical interpretations of these media images are more effective.

In interviews, the respondents distinguished between the importance of appear-

ance to them and to others (they almost always considered appearance more important to others), and discussed how different groups of others might use and interpret media images. Close girlfriends usually were not regarded as holding the respondents to idealized media standards, but "other" girls—those in the school or beyond—often were viewed in this light. The white girls did not believe that criticisms of images were widely shared; the black girls, however, indicated that their close friends were equally critical. Mary, an African-American respondent interviewed with a close friend, said:

It seems like sometimes we're the only two people in this entire school that don't want to hear this stuff . . . Everybody else might, I'm not sure, but everybody else might be enjoying it, and we're the only [girls] being different and we don't want to hear it. . . . I know my friends, I know they're probably not any of them . . . worried about this stuff . . . in these magazines, like that magazine [refers to magazine in front of her] said "How to Kiss Better." My friends are worried about stuff like how to take care of yourself and learn how to be independent. They're worried about real things that are going to help you. Like who's going to hire you just cause you can kiss good? (May 27, 1994; urban black girl)

Note Mary's distinction between her friends and "other" girls. . . .

In addition to "other girls," the white girls believed overwhelmingly that males are influenced by the unrealistic images and are uncritical of those images. The great majority of white girls perceived that males *evaluated them on the basis of females' unrealistic appearance in media imagery*. Some girls indicated that boys explicitly discuss media models such as Cindy Crawford, and/or insult girls who deviate from the unrealistic standards represented by such models. Although boys rarely are exposed to these images through girls' magazines, the same models and im-

ages appear in magazines and other media formats directed to males and to general audiences. Most respondents perceived that males wanted this appearance in girls, even if they had not heard males talk about it. Alison described how boys may use these images:

Guys mostly look at . . . the ones that are like supermodels, an' then they look at you, an' balance the scales, (and) kinda look more towards the model [laughs]. (April 5, 1994; rural white girl)

Lenore and Andrea commented:

*Lenore:* I think it kind of influences guys 'cause I think the guys a lot just [go for] looks and I think that makes them look more . . . for looks cause they see them.

*Andrea:* They see them and they try to compare all of us to them . . . I just get that perception. (May 13, 1994; urban white girls)

The idea that males want females to be physically attractive complements abundant research on adolescent relations. . . . In this study, however, the respondents indicated that rather than local standards, they may be evaluated by the standards of the media, a public, glamorized, and unrealistic portion of the social group with which they compare unfavorably. Because the ideal—a rare extreme in women's body shape . . . and socially constructed "perfection" of physical features—is commonly displayed, and acknowledged, it may seem that *others* whose views are important to the girls perceive the image as attainable and normative (Snow 1983).

Body image is a particularly important aspect of the effect of media culture on white girls' local culture. The girls reported that they often talked about looks and that they had friends who asked frequently if their appearance was acceptable and often commented on their weight. . . . Several respondents made connections between the media and the girls' warped views of themselves, particularly in regard to body size. For exam-

ple, often before they were questioned directly about body weight, shape, or perceptions among their peers, a significant number of girls stated that friends or girls they knew often talked about being overweight. The respondents indicated, however, that those who said these things were not actually overweight.

Tanya, an African-American girl who was rare in having close interracial friendships, observed how her white friends were affected by the unrealistic media images. She pointed to reflected appraisals in citing their unhappiness with their appearance:

I think that's why some girls . . . think they're too fat and try to lose weight. They look at her [points to a girl in the magazine] and they think they should look like that because they heard a guy say that she's pretty or whatever. So they feel that they should look like her and they try to go on a diet and all that stuff. So I think some people just don't know what they [others] are saying, and people hear them, and so they automatically assume they should do this and do that for other people . . . I hear a lot of girls that are . . . smaller than I am talking about "I'm so fat." I say "if you're fat, then I'm obese." . . . [They say] "I'm on a diet, I can't eat." [I say] "Did you eat breakfast?" [They say] "no." [I say] "if I eat lunch, are you going to eat something?" [They say] "I can't, I'm on a diet." And I say "You're already skinny! How much do you want to weigh? 100 pounds?" (May 9, 1994; urban black girl)

Even when respondents were aware of peers' misperceptions of weight and did not have this misperception themselves, the media's distorted images shift the local standards for what is normative. Tanya's comment to her friends, "If you're fat, then I'm obese," indicates how the media affect local cultures, including those in which girls are aware and critical of unrealism in cultural products.

Thus, because media images were a part of the white girls' peer culture, and because

these girls perceived that significant others—other girls and especially boys in their local networks—evaluated them on the basis of media ideals that were nearly unattainable, they were influenced regardless of how strongly they criticized the imagery. Especially important were body shape “norms” in the media, which tended to warp average-weight and thin girls’ perceptions of their weight and attractiveness, or at least made them overconcerned about weight at objectively normal, healthy, weights. Even girls who articulated the distorted nature of peers’ views of attractiveness seemed to feel compelled to abide by the shifted “norm” of body shape.

The wider range of physical appearances and body shapes that the black girls seemed to accept as good-looking in themselves and others was related to a more inclusive beauty ideal promoted in the “black” media. In addition, the black girls were more tentative about suggesting that males evaluated them on the basis of mainstream (white) media images. Most girls indicated that some males might do so but that others would not. This belief that males (often specified as black) rejected the “whitened” image was important in reducing black girls’ negative self-evaluations especially related to body size. Several minority girls said they believed at least some black males desire women who are not extremely thin. Nadia discussed the “normal” appearance preferred by black females and males:

They're [black females] not trying to have little bodies. They want to be thick. They don't want to be fat, they just want to be thick . . . a nice size behind, nice big bra . . . they want to be a nice normal size. They don't want to be skinny . . . 'cause black men don't like skinny people that much. Some of 'em do, but they'd rather have a thick person. . . . We don't think skinny is pretty. (May 23, 1994; urban black girl)

Thus, the black girls interpreted the media differently than the white girls. In particular, most perceived that the images were in-

tended for other, white girls. They appeared to be affected less negatively by a narrow media image of female beauty. The black girls defined themselves outside the dominant culture and cultural imagery; therefore they seemed to be able to reject the images *as a group*. Reflected appraisals allow criticisms of nonrealism to be practically effective: Because the black girls believe that African-American males also reject the narrow, “white” feminine ideal prominent in the media and define a wider range of black feminine appearances, as beautiful or “normal,” they can express and act on such criticisms of mainstream beauty ideals within their subculture. The white girls’ (segregated) social networks constrained the avenues for meaningfully expressing criticism of media imagery; those of the black girls facilitated media criticism.

In sum, reflected appraisal processes are important in considering how media can affect the self indirectly, even when such images are disliked or criticized. The media are presumed to affect others; for the white girls, as noted above, an important part of the interpretations is that others use the images and find them important and attainable, even when they themselves do not. Reflected appraisal processes indicate the importance of beliefs about how others view us; thus the usefulness of a critical interpretation is thwarted by imagining that others use the extremely unusual image of women that pervades the media. The black girls however, do not view the mainstream images as part of the reference group. In addition, they believe that those important to them, generally within their ethnic group, are critical of the images as well. Thus, they are protected to some degree from negative comparisons. The opinions of the mainstream white “others,” who are presumed to find the image desirable and realistic, are generally not deemed important for African-American girls’ view of self (see Rosenberg 1986).