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Weight commentary in adolescent girls sport: Prevalence and consequences

Sport participation offers tremendous positive experiences for youth, yet is a naturally judgement-based, socially comparative, and potentially stigmatizing context for girls. Body size and shape (i.e., weight) are particular targets in sport. Indeed, qualitative and cross-sectional quantitative studies have demonstrated the maladaptive experiences and consequences of weight commentary for girls in sport. However, the impact of a history of weight commentary on body image and psychological well-being is not understood. This gap was explored in the current study. Participants were part of a SSHRC-funded prospective longitudinal cohort study investigating adolescent girl athletes' sport experiences over time. A fifth wave of data was collected in March 2022, with 168 young women ($M_{age} = 21.24 \pm 1.70$ years) completing a self-report survey reflecting on histories of weight commentary within adolescent girls sport, and current body image emotions and psychological well-being. Frequency analyses were used to identify the prevalence of weight commentary within the sport context, as well as the sources of weight commentary, and specific target (i.e., weight loss, weight gain, weight maintenance). Univariate MANOVA models were estimated to explore differences in i) body image emotions and ii) psychological well-being between those who had a history of weight commentary during sport and those who did not. Just under half of the girl athletes (47.7%) reported receiving weight commentary at least sometimes in adolescent sport. Parents (47%) and coaches (40%) were reported as the most common sources of weight commentary, followed by opponents (26.2%), teammates (25.6%), and spectators (21.6%). Women with histories of weight commentary during adolescent sport reported higher appearance-related shame ($p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .07$), guilt ($p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .04$), envy ($p = .03, \eta_p^2 = .03$), and embarrassment ($p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .03$) as well as higher internalized weight stigma ($p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .05$) and depressive symptoms ($p = .014, \eta_p^2 = .04$). These findings underscore the prevalence of weight commentary and highlight the negative effects that may persist beyond adolescence and into young adulthood. Therefore, system-level change that educates sport stakeholders on the importance of avoiding weight commentary in sport, as well as policy that prevents its occurrence, may improve not only adolescent girls' sport experiences, but also their body image and psychological well-being over time.