Research suggests that as children reach adolescence, physical appearance teasing becomes a common experience among peers (Scambler, Harris, & Milich, 1998; Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler, 1991). Unfortunately, teasing is not as benign or easy to dismiss as we would like, as evidenced by the drastic measures some children take, such as suicide and murder, in order to escape the emotional turmoil caused by teasing (Teriford, 1995). With little scientific research available on adolescents’ interpretation of teasing, it is difficult to grasp why some children are able to cope with teasing and others rely on more drastic measures to escape it. Past research suggests that teasing has remained a concept more or less defined by the interpretation of the act (Georgesen, Harris, Milich, & Young, 1999). It is flexible and can only be identified by the people involved in the interaction, either the person who intentionally teases or the person who perceives being teased. Different children may experience the same situation, but interpret or remember the scenario completely differently. The current study examined the recall of body image and competence teasing. Additionally, gender differences in the perception of and emotional reaction to body image and competence teasing were investigated.

Introduction

Research suggests that as children reach adolescence, physical appearance teasing becomes a common experience among peers (Scambler, Harris, & Milich, 1998; Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler, 1991). Unfortunately, teasing is not as benign or easy to dismiss as we would like, as evidenced by the drastic measures some children take, such as suicide and murder, in order to escape the emotional turmoil caused by teasing (Teriford, 1995). With little scientific research available on adolescents’ interpretation of teasing, it is difficult to grasp why some children are able to cope with teasing and others rely on more drastic measures to escape it. Past research suggests that teasing has remained a concept more or less defined by the interpretation of the act (Georgesen, Harris, Milich, & Young, 1999). It is flexible and can only be identified by the people involved in the interaction, either the person who intentionally teases or the person who perceives being teased. Different children may experience the same situation, but interpret or remember the scenario completely differently. The current study examined the recall of body image and competence teasing. Additionally, gender differences in the perception of and emotional reaction to body image and competence teasing were investigated.

Methods

Participants

N = 62 middle school males (M=12.32, SD=1.80)
N = 137 middle school females (M=12.34, SD=.86)
Ethnicity: 75% Caucasian 13% Hispanic 4% African American 4% Asian/Pacific

Videotape Stimuli

• Body Image Teasing-vignette of an adolescent male teasing an adolescent female about body-related issues (e.g., complexion, weight).
• Competence Teasing-vignette of an adolescent male teasing an adolescent female about competency issues (e.g., intelligence, college aptitude).
• Control - vignette identical to those in the experimental tapes, but excluding the teasing comments.

Measures

• Teasing Recall Task-Participants wrote down everything they recalled about the teasing video they viewed. Teasing responses were coded into categories.
• Teasing Questionnaire-Designed to assess participants’ subjective perception of (ranging from very mean to very nice) and emotional reaction to (ranging from very upset to very happy) the teasing incidents.

Procedure

Time 1 - Demographic information was collected from participants.
Time 2 - All participants were randomly assigned to view the body image teasing, competence teasing, or control videotape. The Teasing Recall Task and the Teasing Questionnaire were administered.
Time 3 - The free recall task and the teasing questionnaire were re-administered two weeks later.

Figure 1. Females’ mean number of recalled appearance-related teasing phrases and competency teasing phrases for body-image and competency teasing groups over time.

Results

• Results of independent t-tests revealed that females in the body-image teasing group recalled more teasing phrases (M=2.23, SD=1.80; M=1.43, SD=1.01) than those in the competency teasing group (M=.88, SD=.99; M=.89, SD=.99) at both Time 2 (t(78)=4.26, p<.00) and Time 3 (t(63) = 2.20, p = .03). No significant differences were found between experimental groups for males and no gender differences were found between the recall of either type of teasing phrases.

• A mixed 2 (gender) X 3 (condition) MANCOVA was used to investigate hypotheses that females would generally perceive and react to teasing more negatively than males, and females would specifically perceive and react to body image teasing more negatively than competency teasing. A main effect for gender was revealed, F(2,75) = 4.31, p = .02. Univariate showed significance for both the perception of the teasing scenarios (F1,76) = 5.09, p < .05) and the emotional reactions to the teasing (F1,76) = 7.77, p = .01). As hypothesized, females perceived teasing more negatively than males. This trend carried across conditions with females’ ratings of body image teasing (M = 17.64, SD = 1.99) and competency teasing (M = 17.89, SD = 1.54) more negative than males’ ratings (M = 16.67, SD = 2.40; M = 16.00, SD = 4.39, respectively). The same results emerged for the participants’ emotional reactions to the teasing, with females’ emotional reactions to body image (M = 16.67, SD = 5.28) and competency teasing (M = 16.73, SD = 1.92) being rated more negatively than the males’ reactions (M = 14.22, SD = 4.79; M = 14.56, SD = 2.83, respectively).

Discussion

Females’ ability to recall more body image teasing phrases may reflect media and sociocultural influences on women that imply appearance is more highly valued than intelligence. Females’ capacity to recall more body image teasing phrases after a two-week delay could be due to a triggering of their own negative body image cognitions. A greater propensity to remember body image teasing may indicate that females may be more sensitive to teasing than males, regardless of content. Cognitive theory may serve as an important foundation for future research on adolescents’ interpretation of teasing.

Figure 2. Males’ and females’ mean ratings of their perception of and emotional reaction to body-image and competence teasing.