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| **Psychological explanations for anorexia nervosa** |
| **Social Learning Theory AO1** |
| **Modelling:**Anorexia nervosa can be acquired indirectly, through observation of a model (i.e. modelling), an individual who provides a ‘template’ for behaviour that the observer can imitate. The model can exist in real life, such as family members; or they can be symbolic, for example a cartoon character. Models are influential because they do not just provide an example of behaviour to follow. They can also modify social norms by establishing what is acceptable or usual behaviour in a situation. For example, a child observing an older sibling constantly restricting her food intake may learn that this behaviour is ‘normal’. Models are especially influential if the child identifies with them. Perhaps the child respects the model or perceives them as successful or glamorous and associates the models thinness with these desirable characteristics. |
| **Vicarious reinforcement:**Social learning theory depends not so much on observing behaviour, but on observing the positive or negative consequences of that behaviour. So if the model is rewarded, for example by being praised for losing weight, this makes it more likely that the observer will imitate the model, because they receive reinforcement indirectly [(or](file:///%5C%5C%5C9or) vicariously).Family members are major sources of vicarious reinforcement. Because they spend a lot of time together, observation of a behaviour is not a one-off occurrence but is repeated frequently over time. If a behaviour such as food restriction is also regularly rewarded, an observing younger child will experience many instances of vicarious reinforcement that make imitation much more likely than frequent.  |
| **Role of the media:**The media provides a rich source of symbolic models, and is a powerful transmitter of cultural ideals about body shape and size. Music videos, magazines, websites and television all communicate images of the ideal body shape for women and increasingly men. In recent times, at least in most western cultures, this ideal has become thinner and thinner, to the point that size zero I presented as a body shape for young women to aspire to. Identification and vicarious reinforcement: There is danger that young women who are aware of media figures may identify with the glamour of female celebrities, fashion models, film and TV actors who overwhelmingly conform to this ‘thin ideal’. This might motivate them to behave in ways that help them to lose weight and achieve thinness, such as dieting and exercising. This behaviour would be vicariously reinforced by the rewarding fame, success, wealth, respect, and satisfaction they observe in female role models in the media.  |
| **Key study on SLT and anorexia:**Helga Dittmar et al (2006) studied the influence of one common model of the thin ideal – Barbie. A Barbie doll is so thin that her waist is 39% smaller than that of most AN patients. Estimates suggest that 42% of the UK women owned a Barbie when they were children, 99% of three – 10 year old US girls own at least one. Procedure – 162 British girls aged five to eight years were divided into three groups. All were exposed to images (in a storybook) of either Barbie dolls, Emme dolls (more relasitc dolls with a bigger body shape), or control images of flowers, balloons, and clothes. Having seen these images, the girls were asked to rate statements about body esteem such as ‘I’m pretty happy with the way I look’. Their extent of body shape dissatisfaction was also assessed by them colouring in two body silhouettes: one they thought represented their body shape, and another representing what they wanted to be.Findings – The girls who saw the Barbie images were significantly more dissatisfied with their body shape and had significantly lower body esteem than the girls who saw the Emme or control images. The researcher concluded that the Barbie doll is a powerful ‘aspirational role model’ for young girls. They identify with Barbie because of the glamour, affluence and success associated with her body shape. As a result they internalise the thin ideal that Barbie’s ultrathin proportions represent. This initiates the body dissatisfaction that may ultimately lead to eating disorders such as AN. |
| **Social Learning Theory AO3** |
| **Research support****P:** A strength for the social learning theory is that it has supportive evidence.**E:** For example, Becker et al (2011) carried out a natural experiment of the effects of television on eating disorders in Fiji, A Pacific island where television broadcasts only became available in the mid 1990’s. The most significant predicator of eating disorders amongst the sample of adolescent females ethnic Fijians was ‘social network media exposure’. This was defined as how many friends and schoolmates had access to TV, video or DVD, and was more influential than the number of hours individuals spent watching TV themselves.**E:** These findings can be explained in terms of social learning. An individual girl is more likely to acquire an eating disorder not because she is directly exposed to media influence, but because her friends are. Friends in the girls social network watch TV (even if she herself does not), and they discuss with each other wat they have seen. Broadcast images of thin celebrities may be discussed favourably for example, and this provides a route to reinforcement of behaviour that seeks thinness, both direct praise from friends for losing weight) and vicarious (thin celebrities being praised by friends).**L:** This is supporting SLT as an explanation of AN, therefore increasing its credibility.  | **SLT explains cultural changes****P:** A strength of the SLT in explaining AN is that it explains cultural changes. AN was once considered a culture bound syndrome because it was almost exclusively in Western cultures and rarely anywhere else. It is still less common in non-western cultures but incidence rates are increasing rapidly.**E:** For example, Ozawa et al (2005) found a greater occurrence of AN symptoms in young Japanese women who regularly read magazines promoting the thinness ideal compared with those who did not.**E:** This is strength because; there has been evidence that this change has been driven in part by media representations of female body shape aimed especially at adolescents. **L:** As a resultthis increases the credibility of this theory.  | **Reductionist****P:** A weakness for the SLT as an explanation for AN is that not everyone exposed to thin people develops the illness. **E:** For example, if the media was a major cause of anorexia then we would expect to see a great many more cases, as most young women are exposed to role models of thinness in the media.**E:** This is a weakness because, the fact that we don’t see more cases suggests that another factor must be involved such as an underlying vulnerability to develop anorexia that may be genetic or environmental.**L:** Therefore this reduces the credibility of SLT in explaining AN, as it may be that biological and non-biological factors are more valid than SLT alone.  | **MAID** |