Reviewer's report

Title: Relationship between body image disturbance and incidence of depression: the SUN prospective cohort

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Reviewer: David Mellor

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This paper reports on a large longitudinal study of the relationship between body image dissatisfaction at baseline, and depression some 4-6 years later. The strengths of the study are its large sample size, and its longitudinal design. Overall, the paper is interesting and provides some unexpected findings, which are discussed within the limitations of the study, and related appropriately to existing research.

Introduction

I found the Introduction to the paper to be somewhat directionless, and its conclusion that “Therefore the aim of our current study was to ….” to be rather unconvincing. That is to say, the case linking depression to body image dissatisfaction had not been made strongly. In fact, given that the focus of the paper was on whether or not body image dissatisfaction could predict subsequent depression, I thought the Introduction was the wrong way around. Instead of beginning with a discussion of the prevalence and impacts of depression, it could have started with a discussion of body dissatisfaction and its purported mental health and behavioural outcomes, including depression.

Method

It would be interesting to see how the participants were initially recruited into the study, given that they are university graduates with an average age of over 44 for men and 30 for women.

In the body image exercise, what where the participants asked to do with the figures shown in Figure 1? It seems that they may have been asked to select the model that was most like themselves, but the authors describe the task as estimating their body image. It seems that they are estimating their body size, not their image. If this is correct, then the text may need to be amended in several places.

Results

In the results section, the comparisons drawn from Table 1 need some clarification. Presumably, only significant differences between groups are reported here, and in each case in which a statement such as “they [men who overestimated their body image] were also older and had lower average physical activity..” is used, one assumes that they were significantly older than both the
group which did not overestimate and the group that underestimated their body size. For the women, it is notable that those who overestimated their body size showed a higher proportion of underweight. In fact they all were underweight. Also for this group, it is stated that most of them did not have employment. This is not true as the mode group was that working less than 35 hours per week (54%). Perhaps the point is that there was a greater proportion unemployed than in the other groups. Some of the variables are difficult to interpret because the SD is greater than the mean for all groups (eg alcohol consumption), or almost the same as the mean (physical activity.

I think that Figure 2 is unnecessary.

Discussion
In the discussion in the second last paragraph it is stated that the lack of association could also be explained because of the possibility that this relationship is in fact reversed. This should be the direction of this relationship is reversed.

Abstract
The Background section of the Abstract is also uninformative with regard to the rationale for the study. The two sentences are not linked. Would it not be better to begin with the statement that body dissatisfaction is an increasing problem in Western societies and is associated with a number of mental health outcomes including anorexia, bulimia, body dysmorphia, and depression?

It is not clear what a dynamic prospective cohort means. The detail related to which and how many participants were overweight and underweight, and correctly classified their body size is probably superfluous in the Abstract, as it is not core to the research question. It would be useful to add to the conclusion section of the Abstract that the relationship not found was between body image disturbance and subsequent depression.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests