

Short Reports

Sex Differences in Perceptions of Desirable Body Shape

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Using a set of nine figure drawings arranged from very thin to very heavy figures, 248 male and 227 female undergraduates indicated their current figure, their ideal figure, the figure that they felt would be most attractive to the opposite sex, and the opposite sex figure to which they would be most attracted. For men, the current, ideal, and most attractive figures were almost identical. For women, the current figure was heavier than the most attractive figure, which was heavier than the ideal figure. Both men and women err in estimating what the opposite sex would find attractive. Men think women like a heavier stature than females report they like, and women think men like women thinner than men report they like. Overall, men's perceptions serve to keep them satisfied with their figures, whereas women's perceptions place pressure on them to lose weight. The sex differences we report are probably related to the greater incidence of dieting, anorexia, and bulimia among American women than among American men.

About 90% of cases of anorexia nervosa (Bemis, 1978) and bulimia (Halmi, Falk, & Schwartz, 1981) are females. Furthermore, although the incidence of these disorders among American females seems to be increasing rapidly, the frequency of male cases has decreased or remained the same (Garner, Garfinkel, & Olmsted, 1983).

Researchers have explored sociocultural factors and, also, have begun to identify male-female differences that might account for these differences in incidence (see Garner et al, 1983, for a review of the literature). Females are more likely than males to weigh themselves more often (Dwyer, Feldman, Seltzer, & Mayer, 1969), to describe themselves as fat (Huenemann, Shapiro, Hampton, & Mitchell, 1966), to diet more frequently (Gray, 1977), and to seek medical advice for problems associated with being overweight (Waldron, 1983).

These differential behaviors seem to be related to the findings that women are generally more dissatisfied with their physical appearance than are men (Calden, Lundy, & Schlafer, 1959) and that the most marked difference in body-image perceptions between the sexes is this dissatisfaction with weight (Berscheid, Walster, & Bohrnstedt, 1973).

Females are more likely to judge themselves as overweight when by objective standards they are not, whereas males are more likely to perceive themselves as underweight with respect to objective standards (Gray, 1977). This suggests that both sexes misperceive their weight in comparison to others of their sex and/or make judgments about their weight with reference to a standard other than that which a statistical/health model recommends.

One such standard might be judgment by the opposite sex of ideal body form. Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, and Thompson (1980) reported a significant decrease in weight over 20 years (1959-1978) in *Playboy* centerfolds and Miss America Pageant contestants. Because it is primarily men who judge these models, women's recent desire to be thinner may be partly explained by their correct perception of men's preferences.

In our study we compare current and ideal figures with ratings of most attractive figures by the subject and by members of the opposite sex. We examine both dissatisfaction with current appearance and distortions in estimating the attractiveness preferences of the opposite sex.

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Method

Subjects were 227 female and 248 male students in two introductory psychology classes at the University of Pennsylvania. They were asked to fill out a one-page questionnaire during class. Subjects recorded their sex and estimated the percentage of students at the University of Pennsylvania of their sex and height who were heavier than they were. They were presented with nine figure drawings (designed by and illustrated in Stunkard, Sorenson, & Schulsinger, 1980, and partly illustrated in Figure 1) of each sex ranging ordinally from very thin to very heavy. Each figure corresponded to a number from 1 to 9 (1 = thinnest). Subjects were asked to indicate the figure (a) that approximated their current figure (CURRENT), (b) they would like to look like (IDEAL), (c) that they thought would be most attractive to the opposite sex (ATTRACTIVE), and (d) of the opposite sex that they found most attractive (OTHER ATTRACTIVE).

Results

We presumed that the students in introductory psychology are representative of all University of

Pennsylvania students in weight and height. Therefore, if they were objective we would expect the mean estimate for the percentage of students heavier for each sex to be 50%. Women overestimated their heaviness ($M = 42.2\%$ heavier, $SD = 19.8$) more than did men ($M = 46.7\%$, $SD = 20.7$, $t(458) = 2.36$, $p < .01$).

The means of each sex for each figure rating are presented in Figure 1. For women, the current figure is larger than the ideal (CURRENT - IDEAL: $M = 0.86$, $SD = 0.84$, $t(247) = 15.32$, $p < .001$), and larger than most attractive (CURRENT - ATTRACTIVE: $M = 0.71$, $SD = 1.1$, $t = 9.54$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, the women's ideal figure is thinner than the figure they think is most attractive to men (IDEAL - ATTRACTIVE: $M = -0.14$, $SD = 0.68$, $t = 3.20$, $p < .01$). For men, mean CURRENT, IDEAL, and ATTRACTIVE ratings are almost identical, and are not significantly different (CURRENT - IDEAL: $M = -0.02$, $SD = 1.1$; CURRENT - ATTRACTIVE: $M = 0.02$, $SD = 1.3$; IDEAL - ATTRACTIVE: $M = 0.04$, $SD = 0.6$). It is not surprising that the male-female differences of these differences are significant in all cases (by t test, CURRENT - IDEAL, and CURRENT - ATTRACTIVE, $p < .001$; IDEAL - ATTRACTIVE, $p < .01$).

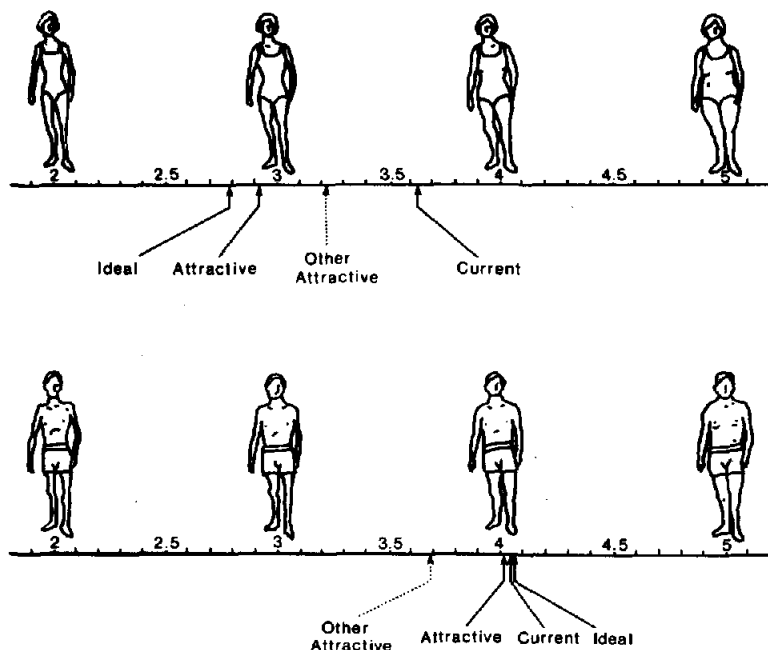


Figure 1. Mean ratings by women (top) and men (bottom) of current figure, ideal figure, and figure most attractive to the opposite sex; mean ratings by men of the female figure that they find most attractive (top, labeled *other attractive*) and equivalent mean ratings by women, on the bottom. (The relevant portion of the 9-figure scale is illustrated. From "Use of the Danish Adoption Register for the Study of Obesity and Thinness" by A. Stunkard, T. Sorenson, and F. Schulsinger, in *The Genetics of Neurological and Psychiatric Disorders*, edited by S. Kety, 1980, p. 119. Copyright 1983 by Raven Press. Adapted by permission.)

An alternative presentation of the results is that 32.5% of men rate their CURRENT figure as heavier than the IDEAL, in comparison to 69.7% of the women, $\chi^2(1, N = 467) = 64.31, p < .001$. Correspondingly, 38.1% of males rate the CURRENT figure as heavier than the one they rate most ATTRACTIVE to the opposite sex, in comparison to 62.4% of females, $\chi^2(1, N = 465) = 27.45, p < .001$. Only 11.8% of males rate their ideal as thinner than the most ATTRACTIVE figure in comparison to 21.7% of females, $\chi^2(1, N = 466) = 8.23, p < .01$.

The female figure that the women rate as most attractive to men is *thinner* than the figure preferred by men (ATTRACTIVE - OTHER ATTRACTIVE: $M = -0.35$; evaluated as a χ^2 for Sex \times Frequency Distribution of figure ratings by men and women, $\chi^2(3, N = 469) = 46.62, p < .001$. On the other hand, male judgments of the male figure that is most attractive to women are *heavier* than women's ratings of the same (ATTRACTIVE - OTHER ATTRACTIVE: $M = 0.28, \chi^2(3, N = 468) = 20.00, p < .001$).

Discussion

Because our data are based on college students from the northeastern section of the United States, and on only one method for measuring body image, it would be desirable to validate our results with additional measures and on a broader population.

Our data on current and ideal figures are consistent with the data in the literature for females; however, where we found a congruence between male current and ideal, other studies have found that males consider themselves too thin (Dwyer et al., 1969; Gray, 1977).

Our data indicate that current, ideal, and most attractive are almost identical for men, and that men distort women's preferences in such a direction as to bring them in line with their own current figure. In contrast, women perceive their current figures to be heavier than their ideal or than what they believe men's preferences to be; their distortion of men's preferences is more in line with their ideal of a female figure. This probably accentuates the female's dissatisfaction with her current figure. The women's distortions (vis-à-vis men's preferences) agree with Dwyer et al.'s (1969) results with high school seniors. They used ratings of *femininity* (not attractiveness) of silhouettes varying in weight and somatotype; girls chose a thinner (more ectomorphic) figure than did boys.

The finding that men desire women who are thinner than what women currently perceive themselves to be, suggests that there is some

realistic basis for the discrepancy between current and ideal figures for women, and hence for the pressure women feel to pursue thinness. However, men's preferences can account for only part of this pursuit of thinness. We will consider two other factors.

First, our data suggest that women are misinformed and exaggerate the magnitude of thinness that men desire. Why do they do this? Women may focus on the preferences of their ideal male. They might believe that upper-class men prefer thinner women (as opposed to the more middle-class men's preferences generated by our data). They may therefore be correctly estimating the figure preferences of upper-class men. Another possibility is that they *are* misinformed, probably as a result of promotion of thinness in women through advertising by the diet industry.

Second, the ideal figures of our women are slightly below what they rate as most attractive to men. This suggests that factors other than attractiveness to men influence the pursuit of thinness. Possibilities include (a) the function of thinness and weight loss as a means of establishing control over one's life, and/or (b) the belief that others (men and/or women) consider thinness in females as a very positive personal feature (e.g., upper-class women are thinner; Garner et al., 1983), over and above its possible contribution to attractiveness.

Women's dissatisfaction with their current figures and distortion of men's preference are probably related to the much higher incidence of dieting, anorexia, and bulimia in women. The extent to which these differences are specific to western and/or industrialized cultures, and the developmental origins of these differences are topics for future research.

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