



# "Ideal" Partners & Body Image Discrepancy: Role of Sex/Gender and Social Beliefs

Kimberly Eretzian Smirles, Ph.D., Emmanuel College

Kathleen Harrison, Emmanuel College



## Introduction

Body image discrepancies consistently predict body dissatisfaction in females (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2006), and girls and women believe that others evaluate them according to unrealistic media ideals (Levine & Harrison, 2004; Milkie, 1999). In addition, women's body satisfaction is lower when they perceive a discrepancy between their body and what their romantic partner wants (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2006). It is unclear whether there are similar patterns in men's beliefs and body image. What also remains examined is whether people's ideas of an "ideal" romantic partner, and their assumptions about what other people desire, predict their own body image.

What is known is that both women and men appear to be inaccurate in their assessment of others' appearance ideals. Women assume men desire thinner women than men actually report preferring; similarly, men incorrectly assume women desired more muscular men (Lavine, Sweeney, & Wagner, 1999). These assumptions of others' ideals most likely affect one's own body image. For example, Szymanski and Cash (1995) found that the discrepancy between women's body perceptions and their judgments of a hypothetical partner's ideal was predictive of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. Body image may be strongly related to what people assume others value. Individual ideals may even be based on the perceived ideals of others.

Research on partner preference and body image focuses on appearance factors; none include measures of personal factors or social attitudes. Masculinity is positively correlated with body satisfaction in women and men (Borchert & Heinberg, 1996). Perceptions of one's own gender role and their preferences for an ideal partner could moderate the relationship between self/other discrepancies and body satisfaction. In terms of social attitudes, the internalization of the thin ideal is an important predictor of women's body satisfaction (e.g., Bessenoff, 2006; Dittmar & Howard, 2004). Anti-fat bias represents another aspect of the thin ideal by viewing overweight people as repulsive (Lin & Reid, 2009). Both social attitudes moderate body satisfaction, and may similarly predict ideal partner perceptions.

The goal of this study was to examine the relationship between self/other body image discrepancies and perceptions of ideal romantic partners. Furthermore, it included an examination of the value of non-appearance related factors (e.g., gender roles), men and women regardless of sexual orientation, social attitudes, and qualitative responses regarding the important factors in an ideal partner.

## Hypotheses

1. Women desire to be smaller than their perceived actual body size, while men either wish to be larger or show no difference between their current and ideal.
  2. Women believe that they have larger/heavier bodies than they believe men prefer in a romantic partner. Men believe they have smaller bodies than they believe women prefer.
  3. Participants' own ideal body size will be consistent with their assumptions of what members of the opposite sex prefer in a romantic partner.
  4. Women assume that men prefer thinner women than these men actually report as their ideal. Conversely, men assume women desire larger men than women actually report.
  5. Women's body esteem will be predicted by their body image discrepancy, gender role orientation (masculinity, femininity), internalization of the thin ideal, and anti-fat bias. It is unclear whether men's body esteem is predicted by the same factors.
- \* One goal of the study was to account for the sexual preferences of participants. However, since only 5 women and 3 men reported preferring the same sex (or both sexes), they were not included in the current analyses. As such, unless otherwise stated, references to men and women include only those who self-identified as heterosexual.

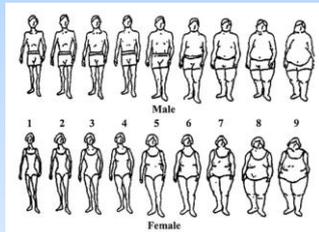
## Methods

### Participants

Undergraduate students (N=212; females = 152, males = 60) from a large, state university in the northeast participated in the study. The vast majority identified themselves as White/Caucasian (94.8%), and they were an average of 19.52 (SD=1.51) years old. Women's (M=23.63, SD=3.99) and men's (M=25.75, SD=4.76) average BMI fell within a healthy range. They were recruited through the university's on-line research management system and received course credit for their participation.

### Measures

**Body image.** The Stunkard, Sorensen, and Schulsinger's (1983) Figure Rating Scale (FRS) assesses body image. Body Image Discrepancy (BID) is the difference between the perceived and ideal body shapes.



**Body satisfaction.** The Body Esteem Scale (BES; Franzoi & Shields, 1984) assesses body esteem along three factors:

- Women: Sexual Attractiveness (SA), Weight Concern (WC), Physical Condition (PC)
- Men: Physical Attractiveness (PA), Upper Body Strength (UBS), Physical Condition (PC)

Participants rate their level of negative or positive feelings regarding each item. Higher mean scores indicate higher levels of body satisfaction ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

**Gender roles.** A revised Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974) included 20 items to assess people's levels of masculinity and femininity. Sum scores are taken for the masculine ( $\alpha = .74$ ) and feminine ( $\alpha = .83$ ) subscales.

**Dysfunctional beliefs about appearance.** The Beliefs About Appearance Scale (BAAS; Spangler & Stice, 2001) assesses endorsement of beliefs about the (perceived) consequences of physical appearance in life. Average score is taken, with a higher score indicating more dysfunctional beliefs about the value of appearance ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

**Anti-fat attitudes.** The Anti-Fat Attitudes Scale (AFAS; Morrison & O'Connor, 1999) assesses negative attitudes toward overweight individuals. Higher scores indicating stronger anti-fat attitudes ( $\alpha = .72$ ).

### Procedure

After reading the consent document, participants were first asked about their perceptions of their "ideal" romantic partner. This included the FRS and BSRI, as well as fixed and open-ended questions. The next section focused on questions about the participants, including demographics, current height and weight, the FRS, the BSRI, and the BES. Participants were then asked questions about what they assumed members of the sex they are attracted to want in an ideal romantic partner (e.g., BSRI, FRS, preferences for attractiveness). Finally, they completed questions about their body-relevant beliefs and attitudes (i.e. BAAS, AFAS).

## Results

### Hypothesis 1:

Using the Figure Rating Scale (FRS), paired samples t-tests were used to test whether participants' perception of their actual body size was significantly different from their ideal body size. Women's ideal was consistently smaller than their current body rating [ $t(143) = 12.92, p < .001, \eta^2 = .54$ ]. However, men did not differ in their current and ideal ratings [ $t(54) = .89, ns$ ] (Table 1).

### Hypotheses 2 & 3:

Paired samples t-tests were conducted to examine whether women's and men's perceived current and ideal body size were different from what they believed the average college-aged person of the opposite sex preferred in a partner. Women believed that they were significantly larger than what the average college-aged man would desire in a partner [ $t(146)=10.18, p < .001$ ]. Furthermore, they believed that men's ideals were even smaller than their own body ideals [ $t(147)=3.40, p = .001$ ]. By contrast, men believed their current and ideal body size was similar to what college-aged women would want in a man [ $t(55)=1.13, ns; t(57)=1.13, ns$ , respectively].

	Women	Men
<b>TABLE 1:</b>		
<b>Ideal Body Size</b>	3.03 (0.95)*	4.54 (0.72)
<b>Current Body Size</b>	4.01 (1.40)*	4.69 (1.49)
<b>Ideal of ave., college-aged man/woman</b>	2.75 (0.83)**	4.39 (0.68)
<b>Current Body Size</b>	4.01 (1.41)**	4.64 (1.51)
<b>Ideal Body Size</b>	3.02 (0.94)***	4.50 (0.73)
<b>Ideal of ave., college-aged man/woman</b>	2.75 (0.82)***	4.36 (0.74)

In order to examine the accuracy of women's and men's perceptions of what the opposite sex would want in an ideal partner, their ratings on two different questions were compared. Women assumed that men desired thinner women as romantic partners than men actually reported. However, there does not appear to be a difference for men.

TABLE 2:		What men	
What women assumed men wanted:	2.75 (0.82)	assumed women wanted:	4.36 (0.74)
What men actually wanted:	3.46 (0.85)	What women actually wanted:	4.46 (0.78)

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### Hypothesis 5

Regression analyses tested whether body esteem was predicted by personal evaluations and social attitudes/beliefs. Two subscales of the BES were used for women (SA, WC) and men (PA, UBS), leading to four linear regression analyses. The predictors were entered in the following order: body image discrepancy (BID), gender role (masculinity, femininity), beliefs about appearance (BAAS), and anti-fat bias (AFAS); this was based on the assumption that personal factors are more predictive than social factors.

**Women and sexual attractiveness.** The model was significant ( $R^2 = .19; F(5, 144)=6.45, p < .001$ ). Masculinity ( $\beta = .20, t(139)=2.51, p = .013$ ), Femininity ( $\beta = .21, t(139)=2.60, p = .010$ ), and BAAS ( $\beta = -.26, t(139)=-.292, p = .004$ ) were significant predictors of women's feelings of being sexually attractive, but BID and AFAS were not. Being higher on masculinity and femininity, and having lower internalization of the thin ideal predicted stronger feelings of sexual attractiveness.

**Women and weight concern.** The model was significant ( $R^2 = .58; F(5, 144)=38.32, p < .001$ ). BID ( $\beta = -.60, t(139)=-9.96, p < .001$ ), Masculinity ( $\beta = .12, t(139)=2.11, p = .036$ ), Femininity ( $\beta = .13, t(139)=2.20, p = .030$ ), BAAS ( $\beta = -.28, t(139)=-4.41, p < .001$ ), and AFAS ( $\beta = .23, t(139)=3.84, p < .001$ ) were all predictors of women's satisfaction with their weight. Having a larger body image discrepancy, lower scores on masculinity and femininity, stronger internalization of the thin ideal, and weaker anti-fat attitudes predicted lower satisfaction with one's weight.

**Men and physical attractiveness.** The model was significant ( $R^2 = .31; F(5, 54)=4.38, p = .002$ ). However, only masculinity ( $\beta = .47, t(49)=2.97, p = .005$ ) was a predictor of physical attractiveness. Men higher in masculinity were more confident regarding their physical attractiveness.

**Men and upper body strength.** The model was significant ( $R^2 = .32; F(5, 54)=4.66, p = .001$ ). Masculinity ( $\beta = .35, t(49)=2.26, p = .028$ ) and AFAS ( $\beta = .28, t(49)=2.03, p = .048$ ) were the only significant predictors of upper body strength. Men higher in masculinity and having stronger anti-fat attitudes were more confident in their upper body strength.

## Conclusion

Women wanted to be thinner and believed that men desire a woman who is thinner than they are. In fact, they believed men want women who are thinner than women themselves want to be, disproving the theory that one's own ideals are based on the assumptions of others' ideals. Women's body image is not entirely based upon what they think men want. Other social influences (e.g., media) create a complex socialization process through which women learn what is considered attractive.

Franzoi and Shields' (1984) concept of body satisfaction is important to understanding overall body image. Women's feelings of sexual attractiveness and concern about their weight were predicted by their gender roles and the beliefs about the value of their appearance. However, body image discrepancy and anti-fat bias only predicted weight concerns. This may be due to the nature of the measures' focus on body size. This does illustrate that a woman's sense of her sexuality is not solely based upon body size satisfaction and may be relevant towards the goal of improving women/girls' body image.

By contrast, men's body perceptions are in line with their ideals and their assumptions about what women want. Furthermore, typical predictors of body satisfaction (e.g., BID) were not related to self-evaluations. Only masculinity predicted satisfaction with physical appearance and upper body strength. Anti-fat bias only predicted satisfaction with upper body strength, which may be because men's body image appears to be more predicated on muscularity than general appearance.

The next step is to content code responses regarding participants' perceptions of an ideal partner and assumptions about others' desires. This could fill in the gaps, explaining how women and men articulate their ideals and what factors they tend to focus on (e.g., appearance, personality) when not prompted by a structured question.