



# Ideal Partner Perceptions: Examining Body discrepancies, Social Attitudes, and Body Satisfaction

Kimberly Eretzian Smirles, Ph.D., Ashley Almeida, Brynne Medeiros, & Sondra Petrone  
Emmanuel College



## Introduction

Women frequently believe that men desire a thinner partner than men actually report (Sanderson, Darley, & Messinger, 2002). For men, results are less consistent. Sometimes, men accurately judge women's ideal partner body shape (Bergstrom, Neighbors, & Lewis, 2004); sometimes, men are inaccurate (Demarest & Allen, 2000). GROSSBARD, Neighbors, and Larimer (2011) argue that these misperceptions about others' ideals have consequences for women's and men's own body image. The goal of the current study was to further explore this argument by examining self and other body discrepancies in relation to ideal partners, their relationship to body satisfaction, and whether relevant social attitudes can explain the relationship.

Researchers consistently find that larger discrepancies between women's perceptions of their actual bodies and their ideal body predict stronger body dissatisfaction (e.g., Halliwell & Dittmar, 2006); additionally, women believe that others evaluate them according to unrealistic, thin ideals portrayed in the media (e.g., Levine & Harrison, 2004). Less research exists on men, though it is somewhat consistent with research on women. Men tend to want thinner or larger/muscular builds, which they attribute to outside pressures (media, peers); if there are body discrepancies, men experience more body dissatisfaction (e.g., Hobza & Rochlen, 2009). Therefore, it is important to examine both people's ideals for their own bodies and their assumptions about what potential partners desire.

Existing research on partner preference and body image focuses on physical appearance. No studies to date have included measures of relevant social attitudes. People's belief about the value of physical appearance in society is an important predictor of women's body satisfaction (e.g., Spangler, 2002), though no one has examined this in men. Societal emphasis on the importance of physical appearance is also represented by anti-fat attitudes where overweight people are viewed as repulsive (Lin & Reid, 2009). Both social attitudes have been found to moderate body satisfaction, and may similarly predict body image discrepancies.

## 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.

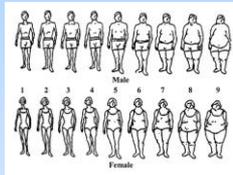
## Methods

### Participants

Undergraduate students (N=212; females = 152, males = 60) from a large, state university in the northeast participated. 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:

Paired samples t-tests tested whether participants' perception of their body size was significantly different from their ideal body size on the FRS. Women's ideal was significantly 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 showed that women believed 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] (Table 1).

TABLE 1:	Women	Men
Ideal Body Size	3.03 (0.95)*	4.54 (0.72)
Current Body Size	4.01 (1.40)*	4.69 (1.49)
Ideal of ave., college-aged man/woman	2.75 (0.83)**	4.39 (0.68)
Current Body Size	4.01 (1.41)**	4.64 (1.51)
Ideal Body Size	3.02 (0.94)***	4.50 (0.73)
Ideal of ave., college-aged man/woman	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 was no difference for men (See Table 2).

### TABLE 2:

Women assumed men wanted:	2.75 (0.82)	Men assumed women wanted:	4.36 (0.74)
Men actually wanted:	3.46 (0.85)	Women actually wanted:	4.46 (0.78)

### Hypothesis 5

Regression analyses tested whether body esteem was predicted by personal and socially relevant attitudes and beliefs. Relevant subscales of the BES were used for women (SA, WC) and men (PA, UBS). BID, masculinity, femininity, BAAS, and AFAS were entered as predictors.

**Women and sexual attractiveness.** The overall 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 overall 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 weight satisfaction. 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.

### Exploratory Analyses:

Open-ended responses to, "What do you want in an ideal, romantic partner?," were content coded for appearance and personal descriptors (97% inter-rater reliability). For the most part, women and men did not differ in whether they mentioned appearance or personal characteristics as important in a partner. For example, they equally referenced intelligence, being fit, core values/beliefs. One unexpected point of difference was that women more often cited that they wanted a partner that was attractive. See Table 3 for a sample.

TABLE 3:	Appearance	Attractive	Personal Ch	Intelligence
Women (n=127)	91%	27%(n=38)	97%(n=136)	35%(n=49)
Men (n=85)	90%(n=45)	16%(n=8)	98%(n=49)	36%(n=18)

## Conclusion

Women inaccurately assumed that men desire thin women as their ideal partners, and women's own self-ideals are even thinner. Although their assumptions about men's ideals may play a role in their body image, women's body image is not entirely based upon what they believe men want. Other social influences create a complex socialization process through which women learn what is considered attractive.

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 suggests 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. The unexpected finding that women with a higher BMI were more satisfied with their sexual attractiveness requires further examination.

By contrast, men's body perceptions are in line with their ideals and their assumptions about what women want. Furthermore, most predictors of women's satisfaction were not related to men's self-evaluations. Masculinity predicted satisfaction with physical appearance and upper body strength. Anti-fat bias predicted satisfaction with upper body strength, perhaps because men's body image is more predicated on muscularity than general appearance. In all, the use of the BES shows that body satisfaction is very different for women and men. Further qualitative research may help to clarify how their perceptions of others' ideals relate to their own body image.

## References

See attached page for full reference list

\* 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.

# References

- Bergstrom, R. L., Neighbors, C., & Lewis, M. A. (2004). Do men find “bony” women attractive?: Consequences of misperceiving opposite sex perceptions of attractive body image. *Body Image, 1* (2), 183-191. doi:10.1016/S1740-1445(03)00025-1
- Demarest, J. & Allen, R. (2000). Body image: Gender, ethnic, and age differences. *Journal of Social Psychology, 140* (4), 465-472.
- Franzoi, S.L. & Shields, S.A. (1984). The Body-Esteem Scale: Multidimensional structure and sex differences in a college population. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 48*(2), 173-178.
- Grossbard, J. R., Neighbors, C., & Larimer, M. E. (2011). Perceived norms for thinness and muscularity among college students: What do men and women really want? *Eating Behaviors, 12*, 192-199. doi: 10.1016/j.eatbeh.2011.04.005
- Halliwell, E. & Dittmar, H. (2006). Associations between appearance-related self-discrepancies and young women’s and men’s affect, body satisfaction, and emotional eating: A comparison of fixed-item and participant generated self-discrepancies. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 32* (4), 447-458. doi: 10.1177/0146167205284005
- Hobza, C. L. & Rochlen, A. B. (2009). Gender role conflict, drive for masculinity, and impact of ideal media portrayals on men. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity, 10* (2), 120-130. DOI: 10.1037/a0015040
- Levine, M. P. & Harrison, K. (2008). Effects of media on eating disorders and body image. In J. Bryan & M. B. Oliver (Eds.), *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed)* (pp. 490-516). New York: Routledge.
- Lin, L. & Reid, K. (2009). The relationship between media exposure and anti-fat attitudes: The role of dysfunctional appearance beliefs. *Body Image, 6*, 52-55.
- Morrison, T. G. & O’Connor, W. E. (1999). Psychometric properties of a scale measuring negative attitudes toward overweight individuals. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 139* (4), 436-445.
- Sanderson, C. A., Darley, J. M., Messinger, C. S. (2002). “I’m not as thin as you think I am”: The development and consequences of feeling discrepant from the thinness norm. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 28* (2), 172-183. Doi: 10.1177/0146167202282004
- Spangler, D. L. (2002). Testing the cognitive model of eating disorders: The role of dysfunctional beliefs about appearance. *Behavior Therapy, 33* (1), 87-105. Doi: 10.1016/S0005-7894(02)80007-7
- Stunkard, A. J., Sorensen, T., & Schulsinger, F. (1983). Use of the Danish adoption register for the study of obesity and thinness. *The Genetics of Neurological and Psychiatric Disorders*. 115-120.