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Differences in Body Dissatisfaction in Traditional College-Aged Men and Women

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Findings from recent studies of body image have suggested that women are more dissatisfied with their body shapes than men. Participants' levels of body dissatisfaction were evaluated using a subscale of the Eating Disorder Inventory (Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983). Results of an independent-groups t-test revealed a significant effect, \( t(49) = 4.39, p < .05 \). Specifically, scores on body dissatisfaction were much higher for women (\( M = 12.13 \)) than for men (\( M = 3.87 \)), indicating that women do have higher rates of body dissatisfaction than men in a traditional college-aged population. Suggestions for future research include studying whether actual body shape and size has an impact on body dissatisfaction.

It has been theorized that a critical factor underlying the increased prevalence of anorexia nervosa and bulimia in Western culture is the intense social pressure women face to conform to the current cultural ideals of feminine beauty (Brenner & Cunningham, 1992). These theorists argue that unrealistic standards of feminine beauty in the world of high fashion "trigger" biologically-dangerous and often life-threatening diets among women.

M. W. Wiederman (personal communication, Nov. 1, 1995), in a preliminary investigation, examined this theory. Specifically, he compared rates of body dissatisfaction among men and women using the Eating Disorder Inventory's (EDI) body dissatisfaction subscale (Garner, Olmstead & Polivy, 1983). Results showed that women had higher rates of body dissatisfaction than men. He proposed that the higher rates of body dissatisfaction among women reflected the belief that specific parts of the body, particularly those associated with shape change, were too large (e.g., hips, thighs, and buttocks). He also noted that body dissatisfaction is often related to other body image disturbances, like those associated with anorexia nervosa.

Similar studies of body dissatisfaction have produced results consistent with Wiederman's proposition. In one study, Joiner, Schmidt, and Singh (1993) hypothesized that a waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) x Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) x gender interaction would significantly predict body dissatisfaction. They expected a positive relation between WHR and body dissatisfaction would be more pronounced among depressed than among nondepressed women. Whereas a negative relation between WHR and body dissatisfaction would be more pronounced among depressed than among nondepressed men. The authors theorized that, because a low WHR is prototypically feminine, one would expect males to be dissatisfied with lower WHRs whereas women would be dissatisfied with higher WHRs.

As predicted, the WHR x BDI x Gender interaction was significantly associated with body dissatisfaction. Depressed women with high WHR and depressed men with low WHR reported substantially higher levels of body dissatisfaction. Results also showed that overall rates of body dissatisfaction were higher for women than men.

Body image appears to be a source of distress for individuals of all ages. Altabe and Thompson (1992) hypothesized that age would be positively related to an increased discrepancy between actual and ideal ratings of body image presumably because people generally gain weight during early adulthood, at the same time, while maintaining a
consistent ideal weight. They hypothesized that body image distress would be a function of gender. Undergraduate psychology students between the ages of 17 and 40 selected figures that best matched their perception of their own figures. Results showed that, for both males and females, age was significantly positively related to actual-ideal discrepancy suggesting that as they age males and females think they are becoming increasingly heavier relative to their ideal weight. In addition, gender comparisons, as in prior studies, again showed that females report greater rates of body dissatisfaction than males.

In another study, Brenner and Cunningham (1992) focused on gender differences in eating attitudes, body concept, and self-esteem among professional models. The authors first hypothesized that female models would display higher levels of body dissatisfaction than their male counterparts. Second, they predicted that models would display higher levels of self-esteem than female college students. Finally, they expected female models to engage in considerably more dieting and eating-disorder behaviors than the other groups.

Models and college students completed the Body-Cathexis Scale (Secord & Jourard, 1953), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), Eating Attitudes Test (Garner & Garfinkel, 1979), and a demographic information questionnaire. Results of the study revealed higher levels of body satisfaction in male models than in female models. Female models showed higher levels of self-esteem than female college students. Contrary to the third hypothesis, however, problematic eating behavior was no more likely among the female models than among the female college students; however, women in general did show significantly higher levels of problematic eating behavior than did men.

Siever (1994), in a related study, examined the importance of physical attractiveness, body satisfaction, and eating attitudes/behaviors among lesbians, gay men, and heterosexual women and men. Siever's hypothesis was that heterosexual women, because of sexual objectification by men, would show the strongest belief in the (a) importance of their own physical attractiveness, (b) the greatest dissatisfaction with their bodies, and (c) the highest frequency of attitudes and behaviors that typify eating disorders. It was also expected that gay men because of similar experiences of sexual objectification would respond in similar manner on these measures. Because both lesbians and heterosexual men experience less sexual objectification, it was predicted that the lesbians' responses would resemble heterosexual men. Respondents in all groups completed the Body Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Herzog, 1986), Physical Attractiveness Questionnaire (Berscheid, Walster, & Bohrnstedt 1972), Body Shape Questionnaire (Cooper, Taylor, Cooper, & Fairburn, 1987), Body Size drawings (Strunkard, Sorenson, & Schulsinger, 1980), Eating Disorder Inventory (Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983), Eating Attitudes Test (Garner & Garfinkel, 1979), and general information questions.

The data indicated that there were substantial differences among the groups on all of the measures. Gay men and heterosexual women showed much higher concern for physical attractiveness than the others. Results also showed that gay men and heterosexual women had the least satisfaction with their bodies, with heterosexual men clearly having the least complaints about their bodies. Heterosexual women and gay men scored the highest on eating disorders scales whereas heterosexual men and lesbians scored the lowest.

From this study and the other studies outlined, it can be generally concluded that women tend to show less body satisfaction
than men. The present study was designed to replicate this finding in a traditional college-aged population.

Participants
Participants were 25 men and 25 women from a mid-size, Midwestern university who completed the experiment in partial fulfillment of an introductory course requirement. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 23, and all were Caucasian.

Procedure
Participants first read and signed an informed consent statement, and then, completed the body dissatisfaction subscale of the Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI; Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy 1983). All subjects were thoroughly debriefed upon completing the questionnaire.

Body Dissatisfaction Subscale
The body dissatisfaction subscale of the EDI includes nine forced-choice items that assess the extent of body satisfaction. Subjects responded to questions using a 6-point scale by rating each item as "always," "usually," "often," "sometimes," "rarely," or "never."

Results
It was expected that women would have higher rates of body dissatisfaction than men. Results of an independent-groups t-test revealed a significant effect, t(49) = 4.39, p< .05. Specifically, scores on body dissatisfaction were much higher for women (M = 12.13) than for men (M = 3.87) suggesting that women do have higher rates of body dissatisfaction than men in a traditional college-aged population.

Discussion
A great deal of research has been conducted on body dissatisfaction among men and women. The present study was an attempt to further study differences in body dissatisfaction among traditional college-aged individuals. It was expected that women would show higher rates of body dissatisfaction than men. Results were consistent with this hypothesis, indicating that there is indeed a gender difference in rates of body dissatisfaction.

Similar studies have demonstrated that women have greater body dissatisfaction than men. Joiner, Schmidt, and Singh's (1993) research showed that depressed women with high WHR and depressed men with low WHR reported substantial amounts of body dissatisfaction. Their results also indicated that overall rates of body dissatisfaction were higher for women than men. Altabe and Thompson (1993) reported that males and females appeared to think they became increasingly heavier than their ideal weight as they got older, and that females had greater body dissatisfaction than men. Another influential study (Brenner & Cunningham,1992), reported that gender differences did exist in eating attitudes, body concept, and self-esteem among professional models. Finally, Siever (1994) showed that heterosexual women and gay men placed more emphasis on physical attractiveness, reported lower body satisfaction, and scored higher on eating disorders scales compared to heterosexual men and lesbians.

Although this study did produce findings consistent with previous research, the experiment did have a few problems. The first problem is that it did not take into consideration actual body composition. It is difficult to tell if an obese person would have had the same self-dissatisfaction as a normal-weight individual. A second problem with the investigation is that it may have been hard for men to relate to the body dissatisfaction subscale questions primarily because the questionnaire is oriented more...
towards women. For instance, men tend not to carry weight in their hips, thighs, and buttocks and the questionnaire includes items related to weight gain in these body areas. Thus, if the body dissatisfaction subscale had been better directed towards men, their rates of body dissatisfaction may have been higher.

Although this study had some inherent weaknesses, the significant findings converged well with other research on gender differences in body dissatisfaction. In doing so, this study adds further support for the conclusion that women have greater body dissatisfaction than men. Such knowledge can be very beneficial in that it can potentially enhance our understanding of the intense social pressure placed on women to conform to society's obsession with youth and beauty. Research has been conducted and will continually be conducted on body dissatisfaction. Extensions of this research to other populations, measures, and procedures all represent directions for further investigations.

References


