Hypotheses

Participant underestimates (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=3.59) 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.

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 body weight was found to be significantly different from their current body weight [t(145) = 12.92, p<.001, q = .54]. However, men did not differ in their current and ideal ratings [t(54) = .89, n.s] (Table 1).

Hypothesis 2: Participants were asked to rate their perceived attractiveness to determine whether they thought that their current and ideal body size were different from what they thought the average college-aged person of the opposite sex would consider attractive. Women believed that they were significantly larger than what the average college-aged man would desire in a partner [t(46)=10.18, p<.001]. Furthermore, they believed that men’s ideal bodies were even smaller than their own body ideal [t(45)=4.70, p<.001]. Conversely, men thought that women were too fat and the 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].

Hypothesis 3: Linear regressions 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, UCS) tests, followed by four linear regression analyses. The predictor variables 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 each variable would predict the linear combination of the others.

Women and sexual attractiveness. The model was significant (R² = .19; F(5, 144)=6.45, p<.001). Masculinity (β = .20, t(139)=2.51, p<.05), Masculinity (β = .20, t(139)=2.51, p<.05), femininity (β = .20, t(139)=2.51, p<.05), and BAAS (β = .20, t(139)=2.51, p<.05) 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 body image discrepancy, lower scores on masculinity and femininity, strengthen internalization of the thin ideal, and weaker anti-fat attitudes predicted lower satisfaction with one’s weight. Masculinity and physical attractiveness. The model was significant (R² = .31; F(5, 54)=4.38, p<.002). However, only masculinity (β = .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 (R² = .32; F(5, 54)=4.66, p<.001). Masculinity (β = .35, t(49)=2.26, p<.028) and AFAS (β = .28, t(49)=2.03, p<.048) were significant predictors of upper body strength. Men higher in masculinity and having stronger anti-fat attitudes were more confident in their upper body strength.

Conclusions

Women wanted to be thinner and believed that men who are thinner than they are. In fact, they believed men who are thinner than themselves 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 set of factors that may affect body image, rather than the assumptions of others’ ideals.

Francois and Shields’s (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 they held about their value of the opposite sex. However, body image discrepancy and anti-fat bias only predicted weight concerns. This may be due to the nature of the measure/ focus on body size. This does illustrate that a woman’s sense of sexuality is not solely based upon body size satisfaction and may be relevant towards the goal of improving women/girl’s body image.

By contrast, men’s body perceptions are in line with their ideals and their assumptions of women’s ideals. Therefore, the 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 attitudes are an important dimension to consider in the understanding of men’s body image. Men’s body image appears to be more predicated on masculinity than general appearance.

The next step is to content code responses regarding participants’ perceptions of an ideal partner and assumptions about others’ ideals. This could fill in the gap, 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.