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/more muscular bodies, but actually report desiring the same size.

5. Women’s body esteem will be predicted by their body image discrepancy, gender role orientation (masculinity, femininity), internalization of the thin ideal, anti-fat bias, etc. 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 northeastern United States 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=1.39) 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 Schulzinger’s (1983) Figure Rating Scale (FRS) assesses body image. Body Image Discrepancy (BID) is the difference between the perceived and ideal body shapes.

Hypothesis 1:

Paired samples t-tests tested whether participants’ perceptions of their body size were significantly different from their ideal body size on the FRS. Women’s ideal was consistently smaller than their current body rating (t(143) = 12.92, p<.001, r=.74). However, men did not differ in their current and ideal ratings (f(54) = .39, 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(201)=3.46, p<.001]. By contrast, men believed their current and ideal body size was similar to what college-aged women would want to in a man [t(55)=1.13, ns; t(57)=1.13, ns, respectively] (Table 1).

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

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

Participants were asked to rate their level of negative or positive feelings regarding each item. Higher mean scores indicate higher levels of body satisfaction (n = 94).

Gender roles. A revised Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974) included 29 items to assess people’s levels of masculinity and femininity. Sum scores are taken for the masculine (n = .74) and feminine (n = .83) subscales.

Dysfunctional beliefs about appearance. The Beliefs About Appearance Scale (BAAS; Spirtes & 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 (n = 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 (n = 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 wanted: an ideal romantic partner (BSRI, FRS, preferences for attractiveness). Finally, they completed questions about their body-relevant beliefs and attitudes (i.e. BAAS, AFAS).

Results

Men and physical attractiveness. The model was significant (R² = .31; F(5, 144)=38.32, p<.001). 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, 145)=4.86, p<.001). Masculinity (β = .35, t(49)=-2.26, p=.028) and AFAS (β = .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.

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 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.

Conclusions

Women inaccurately assumed that men desire thin women as their ideal partners, and women’s own self-images are even thinner. Although women’s 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, 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 because men’s body image is more predicted on masculinity than general appearance.

In all, the use of the BES shows that body satisfaction is very much a function of men’s beliefs about themselves. Men’s beliefs were validated through the use of the BES to clarify how their perceptions of others’ ideals relate to their own body image.

References

See attached page for full reference list
References


