

BODY SHAPE IDEALS AND PERCEPTIONS OF BODY SHAPE IN SPANISH AND AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS^{1,2}

ERIKA A. CARLSON AND FRANCIS T. McANDREW

Knox College

Summary.—108 Spanish university students (55 men, 53 women) from the University of Barcelona and 111 American college students (51 men, 60 women) from a midwestern liberal arts college responded to Fallon and Rozin's 1985 figure drawings used to measure perceptions of body image. All students were between the ages of 18 and 24 years. Women viewed themselves as being significantly larger than men perceived themselves to be, and women also desired a significantly thinner body for themselves than did men. Overall, men were more satisfied with their body shapes and were more accurate than women in guessing what the other sex would perceive as most attractive. The minimal differences between Spanish and American students suggested that sex has a more powerful influence on perceptions of body shape than does cultural background.

Research over the past 30 years has consistently indicated that college women in the United States have strong preferences for the unrealistically thin ideal body shapes omnipresent in mass media, and women's satisfaction with their own body shape has continued to decline while incidence of eating disorders has increased (Bosch, 2000; Demarest & Allen, 2000; Owen & Laurel-Seller, 2000; Mulholland & Mintz, 2001). This trend is especially pronounced among Caucasian women and is less strong among African Americans (Demarest & Allen, 2000; Tsai & Gray, 2000).

Most of this research has been conducted in the United States, most of it with women. The current study investigated how pervasive this tendency is in a different Western society, as well as compiling some comparative data from men. There were several reasons why Spain might be a particularly relevant country in which to pursue this issue. Recent concern in Spain over the prevalence of eating disorders has resulted in a government-sponsored task force to investigate the role played by the fashion industry and the media in exacerbating the problem (Bosch, 2000), and an obsession with staying thin is a prominent aspect of current Spanish popular culture. Consequently, it was predicted that Spaniards would have an even thinner ideal body image than Americans for both men and women. Our other hypotheses were that men and women would not correctly perceive which body shape would be

¹The authors acknowledge the support of the Richter Memorial Scholarship Fund at Knox College and the comments of several anonymous reviewers on earlier drafts of the manuscript.

²Address enquiries to Francis T. McAndrew, Department of Psychology, Knox College, Galesburg, IL 61401-4999 or e-mail (fmcandre@knox.edu).

most attractive to the opposite sex. It was predicted that men would overestimate the body size that women would find most attractive and that women would underestimate the body size that would be most attractive to men.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 108 Spanish university students (55 men, 53 women) from Catalonia and 111 American college students (51 men, 60 women) attending a liberal arts college in Illinois. All of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 24 years. Physical characteristics of the participants such as weight, height, Body Mass Index, and race were not assessed.

Procedure

The Fallon and Rozin (1985) figure drawings were used to measure perceptions of ideal body image. These two-dimensional drawings consist of two sets of nine figures arranged in order from very thin to very heavy, of female bodies and the other set of male bodies. Each figure corresponds to a numerical score ranging from 10 (thinnest) to 90 (heaviest) with an interval of 10 between figures. Each participant selected the figure drawing that reflected each of the following judgments: (a) What the student thought his current figure looked like, (b) What the student wished he looked like, (c) The body shape the student thought members of the opposite sex would find most attractive, and (d) The opposite-sex body shape that he personally found most attractive.

RESULTS

Mean ratings were analyzed with 2 (sex of participant: male, female) \times 2 (nationality: Spanish, American) analyses of variance. Women viewed themselves as being significantly larger than men perceived themselves to be ($F_{1,200} = 6.34, p < .01$; $Ms: 46.2$ vs 40.1), and women also desired a significantly thinner body for themselves than did men ($F_{1,200} = 3.99, p < .05$; $Ms: 34.9$ vs 38.2). Women's beliefs about what men found attractive, as reported in this study, were less accurate than the men's ideas of what women found attractive, as reported by the women ($F_{1,200} = 12.59, p < .0001$). More specifically, women thought that men would desire thinner female bodies than was actually the case. Men on the average believed that women would find a body shape of 37.4 to be most attractive, and the women in this study actually preferred on the average a body shape of 36.6. Women, on the other hand, thought that men would be most attracted to a 32.4 body shape, but the men's actual preference was for a larger body shape (38.0). Overall, men were also more satisfied with their body shapes than were women ($F_{1,200} = 12.98, p < .0001$; $Ms: 8.5$ vs 12.7 ; a higher score means less satisfaction).

There were no significant main effects ($p > .05$) for nationality on any of

the dependent variables, but a significant interaction of sex and nationality indicated that Spanish women's ideals for their own bodies were closely aligned with what they thought men wanted in female bodies, whereas American women seemed to set ideals for themselves independently of what they thought men desired ($F_{1,200}=3.97, p<.05$). This analysis was conducted on the difference scores between what each subject thought members of the opposite sex would find most attractive and that subject's ideal for his own body shape.

DISCUSSION

The prediction that Spaniards would report smaller current and ideal body shapes than Americans was not supported. The prediction that women would underestimate the size of men's preferred female body shape was strongly supported, and, as predicted, men somewhat overestimated the females' preferred body shape size for males, albeit not significantly so. In fact, it was clear that sex was a more powerful influence on one's perceptions of body shape than was culture, at least in the context of this comparison between Spain and the United States. These results are consistent with many studies in that a person's sex is one of the best predictors of preferred body shape (Bosch, 2000; Demarest & Allen, 2000), and they are also consistent with the findings that cultural differences in preferred body shape have diminished in recent years, possibly due to the growing influence of western media (Tsai & Gray, 2000; Mulholland & Mintz, 2001).

It is tempting in studies of this kind to conclude that women's dissatisfaction with their body shapes stems from the influence of mass media, and there is in fact research to suggest that a woman's perception of the shape of her body can be altered after as little as 30 min. of exposure to television programming and advertising (Myers & Biocca, 1992). However, given the limitations of the ratings, any such conclusion would be highly speculative. We can safely conclude though, that sex differences in body shape ideals are alive and well in Spain. Research in nonwestern societies is needed to explore whether these sex differences are primarily a matter of socialization.

REFERENCES

- BOSCH, X. (2000) Please don't pass the paella. *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 283, 1405-1410.
- DEMAREST, J., & ALLEN, R. (2000) Body image: gender, ethnic, and age differences. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 140, 465-472.
- FALLON, E., & ROZIN, P. (1985) Sex differences in perceptions of desirable body shape. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 94, 102-105.
- MULHOLLAND, A. M., & MINTZ, L. B. (2001) Prevalence of eating disorders among African American women. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 48, 111-116.
- MYERS, P. N., & BIOCCA, F. A. (1992) The elastic body image: the effect of television advertising and programming on body-image distortions in young women. *Journal of Communication*, 42, 108-133.

- OWEN, P. R., & LAUREL-SELLER, E. (2000) Weight and shape ideals: thin is dangerously in. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 30, 979-990.
- TSAI, G., & GRAY, J. (2000) The eating disorder inventory among Asian American college women. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 140, 527-529.

Accepted October 21, 2004.