Body Image, Attitudes to Weight, and Misperceptions of Figure
Preferences of the Opposite Sex: A Comparison
of Men and Women in Two Generations

Paul Rozin
University of Pennsylvania

April Fallon
Medical College of Pennsylvania

This study explores some possible causes of the recent increase in dieting and eating disorders among American women. Measures on body image, attitudes to eating and weight, and eating behaviors were collected from male (sons) and female (daughters) college students and their biological parents. All groups but the sons considered their current body shape to be heavier than their ideal. Mothers and daughters believed that men (of their own generation) prefer much thinner women than these men actually prefer. Mothers and daughters both showed great concern about weight and eating. Although fathers resembled mothers and daughters in their perception of being overweight, they were more similar to their sons in being relatively unconcerned about weight and eating. Hence, the major factor in concern about weight is sex rather than generation or discrepancy between perception of current and ideal body shape.

Concern about weight and body shape is much more common in women than in men in American society (Cash, Winstead, & Janda, 1986; Dwyer, Feldman, Seltzer, & Mayer, 1969; see Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985, for a review). In this article we examine attitudes to weight or bodies in children (college age) and their parents to see whether there are generational differences that parallel the dramatic rise in eating disorders among women in recent years (Garfinkel & Garner, 1982).

Fallon and Rozin (1985) reported that female college students judged their current appearance to be significantly heavier than their ideal figure, whereas male college students did not. Furthermore, the female students' perception of what male students considered the ideal female figure to be was significantly thinner than the figure that male students actually selected. In contrast, male students believed that women preferred a male figure of the male students' current size, where in fact, female students preferred thinner men. Thus, the female students exaggerated male students' actual preferences in such a direction as to be consistent with or cause dissatisfaction with their current figures. Male students distorted female perceptions so as to be consistent with or cause satisfaction with their current figures. We hypothesize that dissatisfaction with body image, coupled with the belief that thinness is a very important feature, helps to explain the greater female concern with weight control. The greater involvement is manifested in a number of ways, including increased dieting and higher incidences of eating disorders.

In this study we examine these hypotheses, in a cross-generational study. We obtain body-image satisfaction ratings, attitudes to weight, and frequency of weight-related or food restriction practices from college students and their parents. This allows us to evaluate the relative roles of generation and sex. It also allows us to explore the relations among sex, generation, concern about weight, and eating attitudes and behaviors.

Method

Subjects

Questionnaires were distributed to volunteers in introductory psychology classes, to be taken home over the spring break. Students were eligible to participate if (a) both of their biological parents were alive and still married, and (b) the student had spent virtually all of his or her precollege life living with these parents. The student filled out a questionnaire in class, and brought two questionnaires to his or her parents during the spring break. These were mailed back to the investigators. Subjects were instructed not to discuss any of the material in the questionnaires until all were filled out and sealed in the envelope. Approximately half of the students who were eligible provided a full, usable set of data (N = 97 families). The data set contained 55 daughters (M = 18.6 years), 42 sons (M = 19.0 years), 97 fathers (M = 50.3 years), and 97 mothers (M = 46.5 years). Ninety-one of the 97 families were white; 31 of the families were Christian, 58 were Jewish and 8 were "other." This represents a vastly higher percentage Jewish families than exists in the American population.

Questionnaire

The anonymous questionnaire requested the age, sex, race, ethnic group, height, and weight of each subject. Subjects were presented with nine figure drawings (designed by and illustrated in Stunkard, Sorenson, & Schlusinger, 1980, and identical to those used by Fallon & Rozin, 1985) of each sex, accompanied by numerical values (10 = very thin,
Figure 1. Mean ratings of current (C), ideal (I), most attractive to opposite sex (A), and most attractive to opposite sex as rated by the opposite sex (other attractive, OA). (The relevant portion of the figure scale shown only includes 4 of the 9 figures. Part A, above top line: Ratings by mothers, except that other attractive rating is by fathers of the most attractive mother figure. Part A, below top line, equivalent ratings by daughters. Part B corresponds exactly to Part A, but presents data from fathers and sons, with other attractive ratings of male figures by mothers and daughters.)

Results

The data from sons and daughters is very similar to the data previously reported from the same population (Fallon & Rozin, 1985). The only notable difference is that although the women's ideal figure was significantly thinner than women's perception of the men's ideal female figure in our previous work, these two values were almost exactly the same in this study (Figure 1).

Body Image

In all statistical analyses, we have adopted the .01 level of significance. This is appropriate because in a number of cases we carried out multiple planned tests between critical groups. For the parametric body image data, we performed two separate 2 X 2 analyses of variance (ANOVAS) (sex by generation) to examine what we consider the critical variables. One ANOVA dealt with dissatisfaction with current body image (current minus ideal) and the other ANOVA with distortion of opposite sex preferences (attractive minus mean of other attractive score for opposite sex members of the same generation).

The ANOVA on dissatisfaction with current body image indicated that women are more dissatisfied than men in body image (current − ideal; sex effect), F(1, 287) = 8.39, p < .004, and the old generation is much more dissatisfied than is the young generation (generation effect), F(1, 287) = 34.64, p < .001, (see Figure 1). There is also a significant Sex X Generation interaction, F(1, 287) = 9.35, p < .002. The interaction arises (see Figure 1 and Table 1) because there is a substantial current−ideal disparity in all groups except sons 1 (tests between critical groups are shown in Table 1).

1 The similarity of current and ideal mean ratings by sons could have resulted from high current−ideal disparities in opposite directions in many sons, which would cancel out. However, this is not the case, be-
The ANOVA that dealt with distortion of opposite sex preferences (attractive - other attractive) showed a strong sex effect, $F(1, 286) = 113.99, p < .001$; the women exaggerated men's preferences for thinness, and the men showed the opposite effect. There is not a significant generation effect, $F(1, 286) = 2.63, p = .11$, or a significant Sex X Generation interaction, $F(1, 286) = 2.45, p = .12$. (See Figure 1 and Table 1 for specific comparisons). Hence, sex is the major determinant of body image distortion.

In summary, mothers showed about the same disparity between ideal and current figures, and perceived male preference versus actual male preference as their daughters did. Fathers, unlike their sons, showed a large current-ideal disparity, but both showed a tendency to distort female preferences in judging women to like heavier men than the women actually do.

**Sex and Generational Differences in Attitude to Weight**

Fathers, mothers, and daughters showed a notable disparity between current and ideal shape, in contrast to the sons (who showed no disparity). In light of this grouping, it is of interest to look at attitudes to weight and eating in these four groups. For the weight and food attitude questions, the Wilcoxon test was used on each pair except son-daughter, for which a Mann-Whitney test was used. For the depression item, we used only sign tests. For the weight item in question, the number 38 in the Son column means that 38% of sons reported weight concern often or almost always.

As expected from the current-ideal comparison, except for sons, the majority of subjects considered themselves overweight (Table 1). The only significant differences on this question involved the sons (Table 1). However, if we examine the consequences of feeling (or being) overweight, the fathers' responses were more similar to their sons than to their daughters. Thus, most mothers and daughters reported that concern about weight occurs often or almost always, whereas this is true for a minority of the fathers and sons (the only significant differences are between opposite sex pairs: mother-father and daughter-son; Table 1). For frequency of dieting, holding back at meals, or feeling guilty about eating (Table 1), fathers exceeded sons significantly only on dieting, whereas fathers were significantly lower than mothers on both dieting and holding back at meals. Finally, although a majority of mothers and daughters said they ate more when depressed, only about 28% of fathers and sons did (Table 1).

In summary, except for judgments of degree of overweight, the major differences are between daughter-son and father-mother pairings. That is, the basic attitude differences between the sexes hold across generations even though the departure from ideal weight crosses generations and is present in all groups but sons. Fathers recognize that they are overweight but do not seem to change their eating behaviors or attitudes too much on that account.

**Discussion**

Sex seems to predict attitudes much better than generation. We compared sex and generation on the five measures of attitudes to weight and eating (weight concern, holding back, guilt, dieting, and depression). The mean generational differences, measured as percentage point differences (see Table 1) are small: 6.3 points for father-son and 9.5 points for mother-daughter. In contrast, the sex differences within generation are substantial: 19.8 for mother-father and 29.8 for daughter-son.

Mothers are very much like their daughters in dissatisfaction...
with body image, concern with weight, and weight or eating-related practices. This finding is inconsistent with the hypothesis that changes in attitudes to weight contribute to the recent rise in incidence of anorexia and bulimia. However, it is possible that mothers' attitudes to weight have themselves changed over the last two decades, such that these mothers were not so preoccupied with weight when they were of college age. Furthermore, even if there has been no transgenerational change in attitudes to weight, there may have been changes in modes of expressing these attitudes. Although this is surely not the whole story, given the major changes in the role of women in society in recent decades, and changes in fashion standards for thinness (Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, & Thompson, 1980; Rodin et al., 1985), it seems to be a part of it.

The fact that fathers perceive themselves to be as far from their ideal weight as mothers and daughters allows us to test the importance of disparity from the ideal in generating concern about weight. Strikingly, the fathers showed much lower levels of weight concern and weight-loss-related behaviors than did mothers or daughters, though slightly more than did their sons. Although fathers were dissatisfied with their current appearance, this dissatisfaction did not lead to the same concern and discomfort as manifested by their wives or daughters. These results support the idea that dissatisfaction with weight is not a sufficient cause for weight-related concerns and behaviors. For fathers, the issue does not seem to be that important.

Our results come from a single body-image rating technique and a few questions about attitudes to eating. They also come from a very narrow slice of our culture. There are trends in our data that suggest greater weight concern among Jewish subjects, and because these made up somewhat above half of our sample, our data may exaggerate the differences in the American population at large. To be able to interpret the differences we report, it would be necessary to get data from different regions of the country and different socioeconomic classes. Furthermore, to clarify the importance and nature of sociocultural variables, we must obtain information from other countries.

Our principal finding is the importance of sex rather than generation difference with respect to concern about weight. The implication is that the importance of weight, rather than the disparity from the ideal is the more fundamental variable in understanding attitudes to weight, and perhaps, the origins of eating disorders.

References


Received June 26, 1987
Revision received November 23, 1987
Accepted January 26, 1988