

Perceptions of Fatness: How Do Men and Women Differ?

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Arguette, Mara; Yates, Alayne; & Edman, Jeanne. "Gender Differences in Attitudes about Fat." North American Journal of Psychology v. 8, 1 (2006)
<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?vid=4&hid=2&sid=a91851f8-9321-4f39-8fb7-03c8d58a5a5a%40sessionmgr2> (accessed August 28, 2007).

Introduction

America's obsession with thinness has been linked to many sources from the media, family and peer influences, genetics, etc. Gender has also been connected to obsession with weight and general dissatisfaction with the body. In this article, the researchers examined male and female perceptions of fat and the internalization or externalization of thin messages from society.

Methodology

College students in the Midwest were recruited from undergraduate psychology and education classes at two universities. The participants completed self-report measures on dislike of fat people, body dissatisfaction, and social position. In addition to the surveys, students' BMI (body-mass index) calculations were taken in order to compare ideal and actual body weight.

Main Ideas

The authors initially hypothesized that women internalize messages about thinness and subsequently exhibit an increased dissatisfaction with their own bodies, while men externalize messages, which result in a dislike of fat people. Other gendered differences highlighted in the study were:

Women were more likely to diet and skip meals

The women surveyed admitted to frequent dieting and skipping meals on a regular basis. Women skipped breakfast and dinner more than men, with dinner being the biggest difference among the sexes.

Women wanted to lose as much as three times as much weight as men. Men were more satisfied with their bodies.

Only 8% of the sample reported being satisfied with their current weight. Women wanted to lose an average of 19.5 pounds while men only wanted to lose an average of 6.7.

Men valued thinness in others more than in themselves.

Men consistently reported more negative attitudes and statements about fat people than women. This occurred despite the fact that men had higher BMIs than women.

People who are satisfied with their bodies expressed more dislike of fat people.

Heavier participants were less likely to dislike fat people than those who were satisfied with their own body weight. Men, who expressed more satisfaction with themselves, reported a greater dissatisfaction with other people who were heavier.

Implications for Extension Programs

Extension professionals creating and delivering programs could benefit from the information included in this article. Program materials and activities tailored to each gender allows for more personal extension work. Suggested areas of work include:

- Nutrition education
- Body image and eating disorders information and prevention
- Self-esteem encouragement
- Mate selection and dating

As women internalize their attractiveness and perceive their value based on physical standards they are more susceptible to body image problems and eating disorders. As men judge the physical appearance of others with a more critical eye than they judge themselves: it can place them at an increased risk for obesity. Recognizing these gendered differences in perceptions about weight and attractiveness is needed in order to help combat problems that plague both men and women in regards to weight and health.