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Cultural, Psychological, and Behavioral Dimensions

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Women have traditionally been concerned with their appearance. Indeed, the pursuit of and preoccupation with beauty are central features of the female sex-role stereotype (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985). Perhaps because of this, we have ignored the significant role that physical appearance and body image play for men. Certainly, examination of current magazines and other media strongly suggests that bodily concern is strong for men. Advertisements celebrate the young, lean, muscular male body, and men’s fashions have undergone significant changes in style both to accommodate and to accentuate changes in men’s physiques toward a more muscular and trim body (Gross, 1985). Today men serve as marketing targets for products such as diet sodas and cosmetics that would have been considered too feminine only a few years ago.

The changes in society’s attitudes toward men’s bodies, along with the changes in men’s behaviors regarding their appearance, have prompted us to examine the role of body image in men’s lives. How does body image figure into men’s sense of masculinity in particular and their self-concept in general? We suggest that men arrange themselves along a continuum, from unconcerned with body at one end to extremely concerned at the other. This conceptualization may help predict the type

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and degree of behavior in which individuals engage to change their physical appearance and come closer to the masculine ideal.

This article addresses several issues. First, how do men feel about their bodies? Given that these feelings often are assessed in comparison to some ideal body type, we consider what this ideal is and what benefits accrue to someone who more closely represents the ideal body type. We then ask how this ideal body type relates to current conceptions of masculinity and the male sex role. We next examine various efforts that men undertake to achieve the ideal, and we evaluate the positive and negative consequences of these efforts. Following this we try to identify behaviors associated with increased levels of concern. Finally, we ask why at this historical moment men are paying increased attention to their appearance and are striving in growing numbers to achieve the male body ideal. Our thesis is that the male body ideal, and various pressures for men to conform to it, may be producing ill psychological and physical effects at the present time, effects that will increase because they reflect a historical trend.

HOW MEN FEEL ABOUT THEIR BODIES

One index of men's bodily concern is their degree of satisfaction with their physical appearance. Of college-age men we surveyed, 95% express dissatisfaction with some aspect of their bodies. Studies suggest that men carry with them images of both their own body and also their ideal body, and that these two images are nonidentical. For example, when shown line drawings depicting seven body types, more than 70% of undergraduate men see a discrepancy between their own body and their ideal body type (see also Tucker, 1982b).

This dissatisfaction is not general and diffuse but highly specific and differentiated. Men consistently express their greatest dissatisfaction toward chest, weight, and waist. Other areas have also elicited dissatisfaction, most notably arms, hips, nose, stomach, shoulders, and height (Berscheid, Walster, & Bohnstedt, 1973; Calden, Lundy, & Schlafer, 1959; Clifford, 1971; Miller, Coffman, & Linke, 1980; Secord & Jourard, 1953).

Given that men experience significant body dissatisfaction because they see themselves as deviating from the ideal, it becomes crucial to
determine the ideal male body type. When asked about physique preferences, the overwhelming majority of males report that they would prefer to be mesomorphic (i.e., of well-proportioned, average build) as opposed to ectomorphic (thin) or endomorphic (fat). This preference is expressed by boys as young as 5 and 6 (Lerner & Gellert, 1969; Lerner & Schroeder, 1971) and also by college-age men (Dibiase & Hjelle, 1968; Tucker, 1982b). Within the mesomorphic category, a majority select what we shall refer to as the hypermesomorphic or muscular mesomorphic body as preferred (Deno, 1953; Tucker, 1982b). This physique is the “muscleman”-type body characterized by well-developed chest and arm muscles and wide shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist. Men indicate greater body satisfaction to the extent that their self-reported (Tucker, 1982b) or actual (Jourard & Secord, 1954; Sugerman & Haronian, 1964) body shape resembles this ideal.

That many men feel bodily dissatisfaction because they do not resemble the mesomorphic or hypermesomorphic ideal might not in itself be particularly distressing. The discrepancy between self and ideal is only problematic if men believe that those closest to the ideal reap certain benefits not available to those further away. Research strongly suggests that this is true, both because physical appearance is so important generally in our society and because of the specific benefits that accrue to mesomorphic men.

It is axiomatic in Western culture that “what is beautiful is good” (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Hatfield & Sprecher, in press). This stereotype is already evident in preschoolers, who view attractive peers as friendlier and smarter than unattractive peers (Dion, 1973) and for whom physical attractiveness is significantly correlated with popularity (Vaughn & Langlois, 1983). Teachers treat attractive children more favorably and perceive them as more intelligent than less attractive children (Adams & Cohen, 1976a, 1976b; Clifford, 1975; Clifford & Walster, 1973; Felson, 1980; Martinek, 1981).

Attractive adults are believed to live happier and more successful lives (Berscheid & Walster, 1974). There is surely some truth to this; attractive people enjoy distinct advantages in interpersonal situations (see Hatfield & Sprecher, in press). For example, an attractive person is more likely to receive help (Benson, Karabenick, & Lerner, 1976; West & Brown, 1975), to elicit cooperation in conflict situations (Sigall, Page, & Brown, 1971), and to experience more satisfying interpersonal relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Reis, Nezle, & Wheels, 1980).
Attractive applicants have a better chance of getting jobs and receive higher starting salaries (Cann, Siegfried, & Pearce, 1981; Dipboye, Fromkin, & Wibach, 1975).

By contrast, obese people are stigmatized and punished by adults and children alike (see Rodin et al., 1985). Children have more negative attitudes toward obese children than toward children with a wide range of handicaps, such as being in a wheelchair, missing a hand, or having a facial disfigurement (Goodman, Ricardson, Dornbusch, & Hastorf, 1963; Richardson, Hastorf, Goodman & Dornbusch, 1961). Adults expect obese individuals to have more negative personality traits and lead less happy lives than lean individuals (Hiller, 1981), and negative attitudes are expressed particularly strongly when obese persons are perceived as being personally responsible for their condition (DeJong, 1980).

Because physical appearance is so important in our culture, we want to ask if the mesomorphic male body is considered the most attractive body type, and if there is any evidence to suggest that the mesomorphic individual gains the various benefits that accrue to attractive individuals. Mesomorphic physiques are considered better looking and more attractive than nonmesomorphic physiques (Horvath, 1981; Kirkpatrick & Sanders, 1978; Staffieri, 1967), and mesomorphic males do receive numerous social benefits. Studies demonstrate that people assign overwhelmingly positive personality traits to drawings or photographs of mesomorphic males and mostly negative traits to ectomorphic and endomorphic males (Brodsky, 1954; Kirkpatrick & Sanders, 1978; Lerner, 1969; Staffieri, 1967; Wells & Siegel, 1961; Wright & Bradbard, 1980). For example, Kirkpatrick and Sanders found that the positive traits ascribed to mesomorphs by young adults were strong, best friend, has lots of friends, polite, happy, helps others, brave, healthy, smart, and neat. By contrast, the endormorph was characterized by a preponderance of negative traits, including sloppy, dirty, worries, lies, tired, stupid, lonely, and lazy. The ectormorph was also described negatively, though not to the extent of the endormorph: quiet, nervous, sneaky, afraid, sad, weak, and sick.

These stereotypes exist in both middle and lower classes (Wells & Siegel, 1961), in blacks as well as whites (Brodsky, 1954; Wright & Bradbard, 1980), and they gain increasing strength with age until young adulthood (Lerner, 1972; Lerner & Korn, 1972) but may decrease thereafter (Kirkpatrick & Sanders, 1978). Personality descriptions consistent with these stereotypes have been elicited when boys of
varying physiques are given personality ratings by peers (Hanley, 1951), parents (Washburn, 1962), teachers (Hendry & Gillies, 1978), and "objective" judges (Walker, 1963).

Males may behave in accord with these stereotypes. Early research sought to demonstrate an inborn relationship between body build and personality (e.g., Sheldon, 1942); however, it is now generally agreed that such relationships are learned (McCandless, 1960) and have no or minimal genetic determinants (see Montemayor, 1978). The research we reviewed reveals deeply entrenched cultural preferences toward mesomorphic males and aversions to endomorphic and ectomorphic males. Given this preference and the demonstrated importance of physical appearance in our society, it is no wonder that men aspire to resemble the mesomorphic ideal and feel dissatisfied to the extent that they do not.

MESOMORPHY AND MASCULINITY

We have seen that men care a great deal about their body build and that they aspire to a widely held ideal of physical attractiveness, the muscular mesomorph. The muscular male probably enjoys social advantages that are yet undocumented. But why has it become so? We believe that the muscular mesomorph is the ideal because it is intimately tied to cultural views of masculinity and the male sex role, which prescribes that men be powerful, strong, efficacious—even domineering and destructive. For example, Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman, and Broverman (1968) found strong agreement that the masculine stereotype included items such as aggressive, independent, dominant, self-confident, and unemotional. Masculinity on the Spence and Helmreich (1978) Personal Attributes Questionnaire is represented by high scores on items such as independent, active, competitive, persistent, self-confident, and feels superior. A muscular physique may serve as a symbolic embodiment of these personal characteristics.

Writers who have made a connection between muscles and these "ideal" masculine qualities describe men as making their bodies an "instrument of their power" (Reynaud, 1983), "armor" themselves (Nichols, 1975), or adopting the "soldier archetype" of masculinity (Gerzon, 1982). These assertions are substantiated empirically by
Darden (1972), who found that people rate mesomorphically proportioned bodies as the most masculine. The embodiment of masculinity, the muscular mesomorph, is seen as more efficacious, experiencing greater mastery and control over the environment and feeling more invulnerable. Indeed, research suggests that people apply such stereotypically masculine traits as “active,” “daring,” and “a fighter” to mesomorphic boys but not to endomorphic or ectomorphic boys (Hanley, 1951; Hendry & Gillies, 1978). Males also view their own bodies primarily along these active and functional dimensions, in contrast to women who primarily evaluate themselves along an aesthetic dimension (Kurtz, 1969; Lerner, Orlos, & Knapp, 1976; Story, 1979), and men consider physical attractiveness virtually equivalent to physical potency (Lerner et al., 1976). Hence they experience an intimate relationship between body image and potency—that is, masculinity—with the muscular mesomorph representing the masculine ideal. A man who fails to resemble the body ideal is, by implication, failing to live up to sex-role norms, and may thus experience the consequences of violating such norms.

A MAN’S BODY AND HIS SENSE OF SELF

How important is a man’s body to his sense of self? How connected to a man’s self-worth are his feelings about his body? Studies have consistently revealed a significant correlation between men’s body satisfaction and self-esteem, the average correlation of these studies being around .5. Although some studies have found a stronger relationship between body-esteem and self-esteem for women than for men (Lerner, Karabenick, & Stuart, 1973; Martin & Walter, 1982; Secord & Jourard, 1953), others have found comparable or even greater relationships between body satisfaction and measures of self-esteem, anxiety, and depression for men than for women (Franzoi & Shields, 1984; Goldberg & Folkins, 1974; Lerner, Orlos, & Knapp, 1976; Mahoney, 1974). How a man feels about himself is thus closely tied to how he feels about his body. It remains for researchers to examine the relative importance of body image to a man’s sense of self when compared with other variables such as career achievement, but the data
already available suggest that feelings about body play a significant role in self-esteem.

EFFORTS TO DECREASE THE GAP BETWEEN ACTUAL AND IDEAL BODY SHAPE

We have seen that a great number of men acknowledge a gap between their actual and ideal body types, and that the greater this gap, the lower their self-esteem. As a result, men feel motivated to close this gap. This often depends upon which parts of the body are the foci of dissatisfaction.

In a large-scale factor-analytic study, Franzoi and Shields (1984) found three primary dimensions along which men's bodily satisfaction and dissatisfaction occur. The first factor, "physical attractiveness," includes the face and its constituent features, such as cheekbones, chin, ears, and eyes. These features contribute to make a man appear "handsome" or "good-looking." The second factor, dubbed "upper-body strength," contains muscle groups that men typically want to build up in order to improve their physique: biceps, shoulder width, arms, and chest. The third factor, "physical conditioning," contains items that reflect a man's concern with being physically "fit" or in "good shape," such as physical stamina, energy level, physical condition, stomach, and weight.

Each of these three dimensions—facial attractiveness, upper-body strength, and physical conditioning—suggests specific ways in which men could attempt to narrow the distance between their real and ideal selves. A man who wishes to improve his facial attractiveness may perhaps modify his hairstyle or undertake cosmetic surgery. However, we believe that men pursue this kind of self-improvement the least frequently. First, facial appearance is typically viewed as less malleable than one's body; "good looks" are seen as something with which one is or is not endowed. Second, this dimension seems more closely tied to aesthetic dimensions of attractiveness than functional dimensions, and the latter are more central to masculine physical attractiveness.

A man who desires to increase his muscle size and strength—that is, embody the muscular mesomorphic ideal—may engage in weight lifting or use weight-training machines. Physical conditioning is most likely to
be achieved through long workouts of running, swimming, aerobic exercising, or other activities that build stamina and endurance while decreasing body fat. Given that the physical effects of endurance workouts may be less readily visible than the effects of body building, we surmise that men who want to be widely recognized for their physical masculinity are more likely to opt for muscle building as their form of physical exercise. There is evidence that weight-lifting men, compared with those who engage in other athletic activities, are more likely attempting to compensate for a lowered sense of masculinity (Harlow, 1951; Thune, 1949), but replications with current samples are needed.

A different route to altering one’s body shape involves dieting. Although women continue to be the largest consumers of diet books and diet products, men constitute a rapidly increasing market. Light beers and diet sodas are promoted by male athletes in order to establish a masculine association to products with formerly feminine connotations. The “drinking-man’s diet” was an effort to capture a relatively untapped male market, and the businessman’s lunch is being replaced now by salad bars and lighter fare. Our clinical experience suggests that men are entering diet programs in increasing numbers for both appearance and health.

Increased efforts expended on exercise and dieting are reinforced by a societal attitude that everyone can improve himself or herself through sufficient effort. People believe that body size and shape are almost totally under volitional control (Bennett, 1984). In fact, this is largely a myth. Individual differences in body build have a large genetic component. Identical twins, for example, even when reared apart, are significantly more similar in weight than fraternal twins or siblings (see Stunkard, Foch, & Hrubec, 1985). Adopted children resemble their biological parents in weight, far more than their adoptive parents (Stunkard, Sorenson, Hanis, Teasdale, Chakraborty, Schull, & Schulsinger, 1985). For those men who are genetically disposed to deviate from the muscular mesomorphic ideal, the costs of attempting to achieve this ideal may be considerable.

A man who strives to bridge the self-ideal gap will experience a heightened attentiveness to and focus on his body. This may render his standards more perfectionistic (and hence perhaps more out of reach) and enhance his perceptions of his shortcomings. Both his limitations and the gap itself can become increasingly salient. To the extent that he feels that he falls short, he will experience the shame of failure. He also may feel ashamed at being so focused on his body, presumably because this has traditionally been associated with the female sex-role stereotype.
There may also be physical costs of trying to bridge the gap between self and ideal. Studies investigating the physiological changes that result from dieting suggest that dieting is an ineffective way to attain long-term weight loss; it may, in fact, contribute to subsequent weight gain and binge eating (Herman & Polivy, 1975; Rodin et al., 1985; Wooley & Wooley, 1984). A substantial decrease in daily caloric intake will result in a reduced metabolic rate, which thus impedes weight loss (Apfelbaum, 1975; Garrow, 1978). Upon resuming normal caloric intake, a person’s metabolic rate does not immediately rebound to its original pace; in fact, a longer period of dieting will prolong the time it takes for the metabolic rate to regain its original level (Evan & Nicolaidis, 1981). Thus even normal eating after a period of dieting may promote weight gain. Food restriction produces other physiological changes that contribute to maladaptations in food utilization and an increased proportion of fat in body composition (Bjorntorp & Yang, 1982; Fried, Hill, Nickel, & DiGirolamo, 1983; Miller, Faust, Goldberger, & Hirsch, 1983). Dieting ultimately may produce the opposite effects than intended. In addition to these biological ramifications, dieting also produces psychological results that are self-defeating. Typically, a dieter feels deprived of favorite foods and, when “off” the diet, is likely to overeat (Polivy & Herman, 1985).

Body-building attempts may also carry hazards. Men tend to see an overdeveloped muscular body as the most masculine physique (Darden, 1972), and many body builders ingest male hormones and steroids in their efforts to attain this exaggerated hypermesomorphic look (Todd, 1983). These represent only a minority of body-conscious men, but the health ramifications for them may be significant.

Thus far we have focused only on the negative consequences of trying to attain the masculine body ideal. There are potentially powerful positive consequences. The more a man experiences himself as closing the self-ideal gap—for example, through exercising—the more positively he will feel toward body and self. Higher frequencies of exercise have been associated with greater body satisfaction (Joesting, 1981; Joesting & Clance, 1979), and programs of physical activity have led to more positive feelings toward one’s body (McGlenn, 1980; Tucker, 1982a). The more a man works toward attaining his body ideal and the closer he perceives himself as approximating it, the greater his sense of self-effi- cacy.

Some men opt not to involve themselves in the deliberate pursuit of the mesomorphic ideal, which can also have both positive and negative
effects. Lack of concern with changing one's physical appearance may protect a man from intense bodily preoccupation and its ramifications, but those who experience dissatisfaction but do not strive to change their physique are likely to suffer from guilt and self-criticism. A recent Gallop survey reports that many people who refrain from exercising feel that their lives would be better if they were to do so (Harris & Gurin, 1985).

SUBCULTURES OF HIGH BODILY CONCERN

The increased cultural attention given to the male body, and the increasing demands placed on men to achieve the mesomorphic build, push men further along the continuum of bodily concern. Men are likely experiencing more body dissatisfaction, preoccupation with weight, and concern with their physical attractiveness and body shape now than they did even two decades ago. Fashion designers are broadening the chest and tapering the waist of men's current clothing lines in order to fit their male customers (Gross, 1985). However, research is needed to document these current trends.

At the extreme, such concerns could lead to excessive attention to one's body and an obsessive preoccupation with body-altering behavior such as weight-lifting, exercising, and dieting. With women, extreme bodily concern, coupled with difficulties in achieving the ideal body type, portends disregulated eating patterns such as bulimia—frequent and compulsive binge eating, sometimes followed by purging (Striegel-Moore, Silberstein, & Rodin, 1986). Those subcultures of women that amplify the sociocultural emphasis on appearance and weight (e.g., dancers, models) manifest higher rates of eating disorders (Crago, Yates, Beutler, & Arizmendi, 1985; Druss & Silverman, 1979; Garner & Garfinkel, 1978). We might similarly expect that subgroups of men that place relatively greater emphasis on physical appearance would be at greater risk for excessive weight control behaviors and even eating disorders.

An illustrative group is the gay male subculture, which places an elevated importance on all aspects of a man's physical self—body build, grooming, dress, handsomeness (Kleinberg, 1980; Lakoff & Scherr, 1984). We predicted that gay men would be at heightened risk for body dissatisfaction and for eating disorders. In a sample of heterosexual and homosexual college men, gay men expressed greater dissatisfaction with
body build, waist, biceps, arms, and stomach. Gay men also indicated a
greater discrepancy between their actual and ideal body shapes than did
“straight” men and showed higher scores on measures of eating
disregulation and food and weight preoccupation. If the increased
focus on appearance continues for men in general, such concerns and
eating disorders may begin to increase among all men.

WHY NOW?

We have argued that men are moving further along the continuum of
bodily concern. But why do men at this time in history appear to be
pursuing the muscular mesomorphic ideal to a greater extent than ever
before? Western society currently places an unprecedented emphasis on
life-style change and self-management as the major health-promoting
activities (Surgeon General’s Report, 1984). The burden of illness has
shifted from infectious diseases to cardiovascular disorders, automobile
accidents, and cancers, many of which are considered preventable
through behavior change (Hamburg, Solomon, & Parron, 1983).
Looking healthy is the external manifestation of the desired healthy
state, so the body symbolizes the extent of one’s self-corrective behavior.
Further, what were once considered exclusively male abilities and
domains are decreasingly so. Whereas once a man could be assured of
his masculinity by virtue of his occupation, interests, or certain
personality characteristics, many women now opt for the same roles.
Gerzon (1982) writes that the five traditional archetypes of masu-
culinity—soldier, frontiersman, expert, breadwinner, and lord—are now
archaic artifacts, although the images remain. The soldier archetype
conveys the image of the strong, muscle-armored body. The frontiers-
man and lord are no longer viable roles for anyone, and the expert and
breadwinner are no longer exclusively male. Thus men may be grasping
for the “soldier” archetype—that is, building up their bodies—in an
exaggerated attempt to incorporate what possible options remain of the
male images they have held since youth. One of the only remaining ways
men can express and preserve traditional male characteristics may be by
literally embodying them.

It is worth considering whether this ubiquitous interest in achieving
the maleness-as-soldier ideal is a reflection of the conservative mili-
taristic trends in our society. Is it a coincidence that men are opting for
muscle building at a time of greater U.S. military intervention in foreign governments, and increased xenophobic patriotic media events such as *Rambo*, a movie that features an overly muscled mesomorph who returns to Vietnam to avenge American pride and honor for a war we “lost”? Perhaps, also, the current ideal of thinness for women represents the flip side of this phenomenon. The thin female body connotes such stereotypically feminine traits as smallness, weakness, and fragility, which are the mirror opposite of the strength and power represented by the muscular male body. The current female body ideal may be considered the “last bastion of femininity.”

We therefore propose a second, “polarization” hypothesis: The male and female body ideals, which are physically and symbolically opposite extremes, may be a reaction against sexual equality, an expression of a wish to preserve some semblance of traditional male-female differences. Lippa (1983) found that what people considered the “ideal” male and “ideal” female body shapes were more different from each other than what people believed to be the “typical” male and female body shapes. Even these typical body shapes were more differentiated than men’s and women’s *actual* body shapes.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The body plays a central role in men’s self-esteem, and men are striving in growing numbers to achieve the male body ideal. This may have a profound impact on their psychological and physical health. We suspect that the causes and consequences of bodily concern reviewed here represent a growing cultural trend, attributable to increased emphasis on self-determination of health and the ambiguity of current male and female sex roles. Surprisingly little research of any type has addressed these issues, and developmental studies in particular are greatly needed. Perhaps we have failed to focus more scholarly attention on body and bodily esteem because, as Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) have noted, “since most scholars overvalue the power of the mind, they tend to denigrate or even ignore the power of the body.” It is also possible that society’s effort to relegate bodily concern exclusively to the female sex-role stereotype has deflected attention from the major role it plays for men and may contribute to men’s conflicts in acknowledging concern with their appearance. Answers to these and other scientific
questions regarding the role of the body in men's lives will be fundamental to our understanding of the male experience.

NOTES

1. A recent study may appear to contradict this assertion that a large percentage of men experience a discrepancy between their actual and ideal body shapes. Fallon and Rozin (1985) report no such discrepancy. However, these researchers averaged their data, not taking into account that some men wish to increase their body size and other men wish to decrease their body size, and that both are expressions of bodily dissatisfaction. If we were to average our own data we would be led to the same erroneous conclusion.

2. Subjects were 47 undergraduate males recruited from Introductory Psychology classes (assumed to be predominantly heterosexual) and 71 homosexual male undergraduates and graduate students recruited from gay student organizations. Compared with the heterosexual men, the homosexual men showed a greater self-ideal discrepancy on both the Fallon and Rozin (1985) figures (1.3 versus .9, t = 2.9, p < .01) and Tucker (1982b) figures (1.4 versus .9, t = 3.1, p < .01). The homosexual men scored higher on the Dieting subscale of the Garner, Olmsted, Bohr, and Garfinkel (1982) Eating Attitudes Test (5.0 versus 2.4, t = 3.6, p < .001), the Drive For Thinness subscale of the Garner, Olmsted, and Polivy (1982) Eating Disorders Inventory (3.4 versus 1.1, t = 3.36, p < .01), and the Bulimia subscale of the Eating Disorders Inventory (.7 versus .2, t = 2.8, p < .01).

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