

Attitudes Toward Women, Personality Rigidity, and Idealized Physique Preferences in Males

Richard A. Maier

Loyola University of Chicago

Paul J. Lavrakas

Northwestern University

The idealized physique preferences of a group of 94 male college students were measured and correlated with scales measuring attitudes toward women and personality rigidity. Three hypotheses, derived from sex-role research, were tested and confirmed: (1) Males who have negative attitudes toward women would like most to have a tapering V physique. (2) Males who have a rigid personality structure have stronger preference for an idealized muscular physique than males with more flexible personalities. (3) Males have a generally greater preference for a tapering V physique than women. It was concluded, from the results of this and other studies, that body preference is related to certain aspects of sex-role attitudes.

The perception of one's sex role is clearly related to a variety of behaviors and attitudes (see Weitz, 1977; Williams, 1979; Parsons, 1980). There is evidence that perception of sex role is correlated with body preference, especially the bodies of opposite-sex persons. For example, Wiggins, Wiggins, and Conger (1968) found that men who were especially masculine in the traditional sense (i.e., had a high need for independence and dated frequently) showed a greater preference for large-breasted female bodies than did other men. Similarly, Lavrakas (1975) demonstrated that women who had adopted traditionally feminine sex roles showed a greater preference for muscular male physiques (a tapering V shape) than did less traditional (liberated) women.

Beck, Ward-Hull, and McLear (1976) have added data regarding same-sex body preferences. They found that women who preferred large breasts had interest patterns which could be considered traditionally feminine. Taken together, these studies suggest that persons adopting traditional sex roles tend to have preferences for bodies that are defined as attractive in the traditional sense—large breasts in women and a muscular physique in men. In contrast, persons adopting liberated sex roles have less stereotyped preferences.

Sex-role attitudes include different factors. In males, attitude toward women and rigidity in personality appear to be important. Negative attitudes toward women are associated with a rejection of any tendency to move toward a “feminine” sex-role orientation, and rigidity implies a resistance to change from a traditional orientation. Thus, in the present study, the measures used—attitudes toward women and rigidity—seem to allow for a general comparison with the results of the studies previously mentioned.

The present study tests three hypotheses: (1) Males who have negative attitudes towards women would like most to have a tapering V physique. (2) Males who have a rigid personality structure have a stronger preference for the traditionally attractive tapering V physique than males with more flexible personalities. (3) Males have a generally greater preference for the tapering V physique than women. The third hypothesis is based on the observation that males seem less inclined than females to alter their sex-role orientation, presumably because a male change represents sacrificing power in relation to women (Pleck, 1979). Therefore males would seem more likely than females to maintain a traditional physique preference. (Since the silhouettes used are the same as in the 1975 Lavrakas study—and the sample of males roughly comparable to the 1975 sample of females—it is possible to systematically compare male and female preferences for male physiques.)

METHOD

Subjects

Participants were 94 male college undergraduates ranging in age from 18 to 22 years old. Approximately half of the men came from an introductory psychology course of Loyola University and fulfilled a course requirement by participating. The sample was predominantly Caucasian, middle class, and Catholic. In demographic terms, this group of males was very similar to the sample of females used by Lavrakas (1975).

Stimuli

The frontal view of 19 male silhouettes served as stimuli. The figures were constructed by independently varying four body regions: arms (A), upper trunk (UT), lower trunk (LT), and legs (L). Variation in the size of a body region was in reference to a standard medium figure. Each of the four regions could assume a thin (-2), medium thin (-1), medium (0), medium wide (+1), or wide (+2) appearance. Sixteen of the figures were constructed so that only one of the regions deviated from the medium value. The remaining two figures were comprised of uniform dimensions in all regions producing a thin (-2) and wide (+2) physique. (For more details of the construction technique, see Wiggins et al., 1968, p. 83). The actual width of the various regions conformed to an interval scale, and figures were uniform in height and head shape. Figure 1 is an example of two stimuli (A = -1 lower trunk physique B = standard medium physique) depicted in the way seen by the subjects.

The 19 stimuli were paired in all possible ways, generating 171 stimulus pairs. Nine randomly selected pairs were duplicated in reverse order, which produced a total of 180 stimulus pairs.

Procedure

Each subject was acquired to express a scaled preference rating between the two silhouettes on each slide. The two stimuli were identified by A or B, and ratings were made on 7-point scales (as shown in Figure 1). Instructions were given to subjects concerning the nature of their viewing and rating task (i.e., to express a preference for which of the two physiques one would most like to have). A recommendation was made that if a preference was not readily apparent, a no-preference rating would be most appropriate.

Following the slide ratings, subjects were administered the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973) and a scale measuring personality rigidity, the F-Scale (Adorno, Fenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Stimulus Scale Values

On the basis of the ratings of the nine repeated slides, the preferences of 23 males were found not reliable and were dropped from further

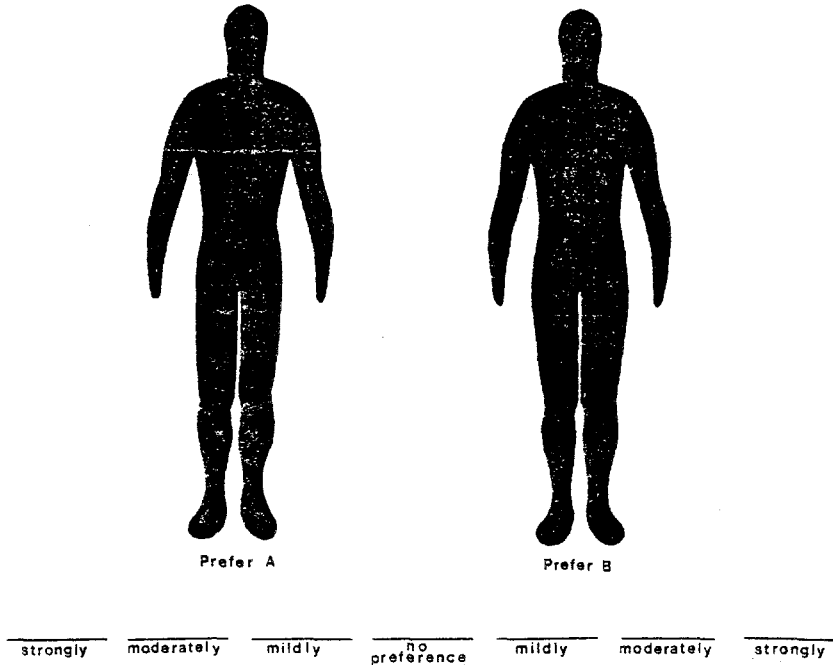


Fig. 1. Example of two stimuli presented to subjects. A = -1 lower trunk physique, B = standard medium physique.

analysis. This rate of unreliability is not surprising, since the rating task was long and tedious. (A comparable rate was found in the 1975 Lavrakas study.) The 171 pair-comparison ratings, made independently by each remaining subject, provided the basis for generating Thurstone Scale values for each of the 19 stimuli. These Thurstone Scale values were computed following the method employed by Wiggins et al. (1968), Lavrakas (1975), and Beck et al. (1976), which treated the preference ratings as unit normal deviates.

Mean Scale Values

The mean Thurstone Scale values (shown in Table I) were computed by averaging individual Thurstone Scale values for the total sample. (These values could range from -3.00 to +3.00.) For the average male, the medium physique is positively valued, while the thin and wide figures are generally disliked. The figures with broad arms and broad upper trunk regions are preferred over those with thinner components for these regions.

Table I. Mean Thurstone Scale Values

Stimuli	Male ratings		Female ratings ^a		Male-female difference <i>t</i> value
	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	
-2 Thin	-.39	.53	-.28	.98	.80
0 Medium	.28	.39	.46	.45	-2.47 ^c
+2 Wide	-.48	.61	-.83	.78	2.89 ^c
-2 Arms	-.23	.40	-.08	.44	-2.06 ^b
-1 Arms	-.18	.35	.04	.42	-3.28 ^c
+1 Arms	.43	.41	.51	.39	-1.15
+2 Arms	.47	.48	.48	.44	-.13
-2 Upper trunk	-.99	.50	-1.20	.47	2.51 ^c
-1 Upper trunk	-.80	.35	-.77	.39	-.47
+1 Upper trunk	.93	.54	.76	.56	1.79
+2 Upper trunk	.66	.96	.22	.85	2.82 ^c
-2 Lower trunk	.12	.79	-.19	.91	2.10 ^b
-1 Lower trunk	.78	.59	.80	.60	-.20
+1 Lower trunk	-.48	.41	-.55	.45	.94
+2 Lower trunk	-1.26	.57	-1.45	.57	1.93
-2 Legs	.67	.65	1.24	.74	-4.90 ^d
-1 Legs	.61	.51	1.09	.52	-5.40 ^d
+1 Legs	.16	.39	.26	.34	-1.60
+2 Legs	-.31	.38	-.50	.50	2.47 ^c

^aThese female ratings are from Lavrakas (1975, p. 328) on the same stimuli.

^b $t(133) = 1.98, p < .05; n = 71.$

^c $t(133) = 2.61, p < .01; n = 64.$

^d $t(133) = 3.37, p < .001.$

In the lower trunk and legs, the physiques with thinner components are most preferred. Overall, the medium-wide upper trunk and medium-thin lower trunk (both with a moderate tapering-V appearance) were the most strongly preferred, while the wide lower trunk and thin upper trunk physiques (both with a distinctive pear-shaped appearance) were the most strongly disliked.

This pattern of male idealized physique preferences is remarkably similar in rank order to the pattern of preference expressed by females for the same stimuli in the Lavrakas (1975) study. Table I shows the mean Thurstone Scale values of females. The rank-order correlation between the mean male ratings and mean female ratings is .94 ($p < .001$). While there are significant differences between males' and females' absolute preferences for particular physiques, the relative preferences among the entire set have a correspondence so high that it may reflect a general cultural stereotype to view V-shaped physiques positively and pear-shaped physiques negatively.

Further support for this thesis is provided by the findings of Wiggins, who compared average male preference for female physiques (given in Wiggins et al., 1968) with average female preferences of male physiques (given in Lavrakas, 1975). The findings of Beck et al. (1976) also

Table II. Underlying Male Preference Factor Loadings for Male Physiques ($n = 71$)

Stimuli	Factor				
	I	II	III	IV	V
-2 Thin	-.49	.34	-.34		
0 Medium			.62		
+2 Wide			-.41	.52	
-2 Arms			.51		.35
-1 Arms			.46		.31
+1 Arms			.68		
+2 Arms	.70	-.31			
-2 Upper trunk	-.89				
-1 Upper trunk	.80				
+1 Upper trunk	.76	-.33			
+2 Upper trunk	.52	-.33	-.57		
-2 Lower trunk		-.38	-.41	-.56	-.31
-1 Lower trunk	.31			-.73	
+1 Lower trunk	-.53			.45	
+2 Lower trunk	-.77			.40	
-2 Legs		.83			
-1 Legs		.91			
+1 Legs					.51
+2 Legs					.52

show a strong correspondence between the rank ordering of mean female preferences for female physiques and mean female preferences for male physiques ($r(15) = .64, p < .02$).

Despite this high degree of correspondence in the pattern of physique preferences held by men and women, there are consistent differences between sexes in the extent to which they like/dislike certain types of male physiques. Table I shows that men dislike male physiques with thin arms (-2A and -1A) significantly more than women. On the other hand, men dislike male physiques with relatively wide (W) or heavy lower body regions (-2UT, +2L, and +2W) significantly less than women dislike these physiques. Regarding physiques that males rate in positive terms, men show a significantly more positive preference for the extreme V-shaped (i.e., the muscleman look) male physique (+2UT and -2LT) than do women. In contrast, men view the more moderate male Vs (M, -2L, and -1L) in a significantly less positive light than women. Overall, this pattern of sex differences provides some preliminary support for our hypothesis that men still value the appearance of strength in the male physique, at least to a greater extent than women appear to value it.

Underlying Stimulus Preference Factors for Males

Factor analysis was performed on the intercorrelations of the Thurstone Scale values, with the maximum off-diagonal correlation initially

placed in the diagonal. An iteration procedure improved the communality estimates. A decision based on Cattell's screen test was made to retain the first five principal factors for rotation. These five factors accounted for 72% of the variance. Transformation was then made to a varimax rotated factor matrix; these factor loadings are shown in Table II.

Consistent with the suggestion that total stimulus appearance is important in evaluating a physique (cf. Wiggins et al., 1968; Lavrakas, 1975), the Factor I represents preferences for a combination of wide upper trunks and thin lower trunks, and a dislike of the opposite (a pear-shaped physique). In looking at the physiques that loaded on this factor, our judgment is that it reflects the general reaction of males to the shape of the torso (the trunk from shoulders to hips). Factor II is characterized by preferences for thin legs. Factor III represents preferences for moderately sized arms and for overall moderate appearance (regardless of arm size) versus more extreme total physique appearances. Factor IV represents preferences for wide versus thin lower trunk regions. Finally, Factor V is defined by preferences for an overall "log-shaped" appearance especially below the shoulders (i.e., for the legs and torso).

Attitudes Toward Women and Personality Rigidity

Support for the first two hypotheses is provided by the significant negative correlations between Factor III and the attitude and personality tests. The r correlation between Factor III and scores on the (negative) Attitudes Toward Women Scale was $-.30(69)$, $p < .01$; r correlation between Factor III and scores on the F-scale was $-.28(69)$, $p < .01$. Apparently, men who have negative attitudes toward women reject an idealized moderate physique in favor of a muscular, tapering V shape. Similarly, men with rigid personalities reject the moderate physique in favor of the more traditionally idealized muscular physique.

CONCLUSION

The support of the first hypothesis—that males who have negative attitudes towards women have idealized preferences for muscular bodies—is consistent with Pleck's (1979) thesis that male power in relation to women is an important variable in sex-role attitudes. If males have negative attitudes toward women (some of which may be related to a fear of femininity), one way to exercise control is by developing a strong body.

The support of the second hypothesis—that males with rigid personality structures have a preference for stereotypic, muscular physiques—is consistent with an earlier finding of Maier and Lavrakas (1981).

This study found that men with stereotypic attitudes about winning at all costs were most likely to prefer a stereotypic muscular physique as an ideal. As suggested earlier, certain stereotyped attitudes seem to go along with traditional, stereotyped views of the body. Another interpretation of the support for the second hypothesis is consistent with the hypothesis that men with rigid personality structures unconsciously wish to defend themselves against "cross-sex identity" (Adorno et al., 1950). Having a traditionally valued, stereotyped male physique presumably defends the male against any sign of femininity (Pleck, 1981).

In general, the results of this study are congruent with those of other studies investigating preference for various types of bodies or physiques. The tapering V male physique is preferred by men, as it is by women (Lavrakas, 1975). However, as indicated by the support of the third hypothesis, men show an even stronger preference for this type of physique. This finding is consistent with casual observations that males are often more impressed by extremely muscular male body builders than are females. It is also consistent with Pleck's (1979) belief that some men are resistant to sacrificing power—or symbols of power—in relation to women.

The conclusions based on the physique preference studies discussed here suffer from a certain amount of artificiality; they involve judgments of silhouettes as opposed to live persons or even pictures of persons. Perhaps some attempt at replication in more realistic circumstances would be fruitful. In the meantime, it appears that studies of body preference provide more information about attitudes, personality factors, and sex roles than do studies of the relationship between actual body type and behavior.

REFERENCES

- Adorno, T. W., Fenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D. J., & Stanford, R. N. *The authoritarian personality*. New York: Harper, 1950.
- Beck, S. B., Ward-Hull, C. I., & McLear, P. M. Variables related to women's somatic preferences of the male and female body. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1976, *34*, 1200-1210.
- Lavrakas, P. J. Female preference for male physiques. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 1975, *9*, 324-334.
- Maier, R. A., & Lavrakas, P. J. Some personality correlates of attitudes about sports. *International Journal of Sports Psychology*, 1981, *12*, 19-22.
- Parsons, J. E. (Ed.). *The psychobiology of sex differences and sex roles*. Washington, D.C.: Hemisphere, 1980.
- Pleck, J. H. The male sex role: Definitions, problems, and sources of change. In J. H. Williams (ed.), *Psychology of women*. New York: Norton, 1979.
- Pleck, J. H. *The myth of masculinity*. Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press, 1981.
- Spence, J. T., Helmreich, R., & Stapp, J. A short version of the Attitudes toward Women Scale. *Psychonomic Bulletin*, 1973, *2*, 219-220.
- Weitz, S. *Sex roles: Biological, psychological and social foundations*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

- Wiggins, J. S., Wiggins, N., & Conger, J. C. Correlates of heterosexual somatic preference.
Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1968, 4, 89-102.
- Williams, J. H. (Ed.). *Psychology of women*. New York: Norton, 1979.