

## **Body Figure Preferences of Men and Women: A Comparison of Two Generations**

**C. Sue Lamb and Lee A. Jackson**

*University of North Carolina at Wilmington*

**Patricia B. Cassidy**

*University of North Carolina at Greensboro*

**Doris J. Priest**

*University of North Carolina at Wilmington*

*Inspired by the earlier work of Rozin and Fallon (1988), this study investigated some potential determinants of the most recent increase of eating disorders among women in this country. Measures of current, preferred attractive, and acceptable body images for opposite- and same-gender figures, in addition to the thinnest and heaviest figures the subjects found attractive, were obtained from the same generation cohort as these students' parents. While gender differences were found, so were cohort differences. These cohort differences speak to factors relevant to understanding why there has been such an increase in the frequency of eating disorders in Western culture since the late 1960s, especially among adolescent women. Possible implications for treatment of eating disorders are discussed. However, the authors note that further studies are needed to determine if the cohort differences found might reflect a developmental or a definite cohort effect.*

The foremost indication of beauty in American women is the prevailing cultural ideal of thinness (Cohn, Adler, Irwin, Millstein, Kegeles, & Stone, 1987; Dwyer, Feldman, Seltzer, & Mayer, 1969a; Dwyer, Feldman, Seltzer, & Mayer, 1969b; Halmi, Falk, Schwartz, 1981; Rozin & Fallon, 1988). One factor in the development of body-image concerns in women with anorexia

and bulimia is excessive concern about body size and shape. It has been suggested that if this were not true, there would be no large scale increase of these particular eating disorders (Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990).

### *Prevalence of Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa*

According to Leichner and Gertler (1988) there is evidence that the incidence of severe cases of anorexia nervosa diagnosed by health care professionals before 1960 was 0.24 to 0.45 per 100,000 population per year. After 1960, this percentage increased from 0.45 to 1.6 per 100,000. The impression that this eating disorder is being diagnosed in ever larger numbers is not without support (Gordon, 1988; Duddle, 1973; Jones, Fox, Babigan, & Hutton, 1980; Crisp, Palmer, & Kalucy, 1976; Szmuckler, McCance, McCrone, & Hunter, 1986).

Some reports indicate that the prevalence of bulimia nervosa is even more striking. Halmi (1974) estimates that approximately 13% of a random sample of university students who were registered for summer school met the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (3rd ed.; DSM-III) criteria for bulimia. In another study conducted by Pope and Hudson (1984a), the investigators reported that the percentage of students who met the DSM-III criteria for bulimia to be about 15%. In a review of the prevalence literature, Pope and Hudson (1984b) have noted that even when stringent criteria were used, the number of women with bulimia nervosa in the United States was found to be between one and three million.

Vanderlinden, Norre, and Vandereycken (1992) echo earlier researchers who have noted that while reliable data are not available regarding the exact prevalence of bulimia in the Western culture it can safely be assumed that the prevalence of eating disorders have undoubtedly increased during the last 20 years.

### *The Culture of Thinness and the Western Marketplace*

Fanatical dieting and the relentless pursuit of thinness have become commonplace in the eating disorder literature. Both behaviors are powerful influences within the culture and have become increasingly prevalent in the industrialized affluent societies of this century (Gordon, 1988; Bruch, 1973; Garfinkel & Garner, 1982; Schwartz, Thompson, & Johnson, 1982). In this country we have seen the extremely successful marketing of the ideal of thinness by the fashion industry. The anorectic body type featured in fashion magazines is not an isolated pathological phenomenon, but instead has become the idealized standard of cultural beauty and of high fashion (Gordon, 1988).

Bennett and Gurin (1982) have called the contemporary idealization of thinness "The Century of Svelte" and they view this idealization as the product of a historical evolution that has occurred over the past century. The authors have traced this occurrence from the "femme fatale" of the 19th century, to the 1920s "flapper," and lastly to the "Twiggy" body that arrived during the late 1960s. They note that this body figure has become the standard of the late 20th century.

### *Body Dissatisfaction and Eating Disorders*

Extreme weight control by means of dieting or vomiting undoubtedly contributes to binge eating in bulimia nervosa (Polivy & Herman, 1978; Rosen & Leitenberg, 1982). Body dissatisfaction among young women in general is associated with problematic eating attitudes and behaviors (Kiemble, Slade, & Dewey, 1987; Striegel-Moore, McAvay, & Rodin, 1986; Zakin, 1989).

In a study conducted by Garner, Garfinkel, Rockert, and Olmsted (1987), the Eating Disorders Inventory (EDI) was given to ballet students who were evaluated two years later to see if they had developed eating disorders. Of the eight scales, only Body Dissatisfaction and Drive for Thinness was successful in predicting individuals with eating disorder symptoms (Garner *et al.*, 1987). From these as well as other studies evidence has been provided of the essential link between body dissatisfaction and the outbreak of eating disorders (Gross & Rosen, 1988; Post & Crowther, 1987; Ruderman & Grace, 1988).

### *The Changing Ideal Body Figure During This Century*

After the end of World War I, hems were raised and waistlines lowered (Laver, 1963). Dresses of the 1920s had no curves and the ideal figure for women was almost boy-like and flat-chested. Ideals of feminine beauties in the 1930s included Jean Harlow and Mae West. During the 1940s the ideal of beauty was exemplified by the "sweater girl," such as Lana Turner and Jayne Russell. During the 1950s there were two ideals. One could be seen in the figures of women as Jayne Mansfield and Marilyn Monroe. The other ideal was embodied in the more svelte figures of Grace Kelly and Audrey Hepburn. This latter trend was continued into the 1960s. "Twiggy" in 1966 became the fashion sensation and a new ideal. With her increasing popularity, the voluptuous figure idolized in the past seemed to lose its desirability (Freedman, 1986; Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990, pp. 87-90).

It has been demonstrated that the women who embody the ideal of feminine beauty in the American culture (beauty queens and models) have become thinner over the last couple of decades to the point that the ideal figure is actually below the actuarial norm. Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, and Thompson (1980) noted that this change has been accomplished by an increase in the prevalence of eating disorders and more reports of sub-clinical eating and body-image disturbances among women. Attractiveness in women has once again taken the form of thinness. This emphasis on dieting and thinness has occurred in a population that, nevertheless, is becoming heavier (Hsu, 1988).

### *Eating Disorders and the Cohort Effect*

Anorexia and bulimia undoubtedly do occur in older women. Nevertheless, anorexia nervosa is considered by most clinicians to be a disorder of adolescence with the average age of onset ranging from 12 to 25 years (Vandereycken, 1988).

Bulimia nervosa usually has an onset between 16 and 19 (Johnson, Stuckey, Lewis, & Schwartz, 1982; Herzog, 1982). While bulimia is considered an eating disorder primarily of young women, clinicians have reported cases of women in their 40s and 50s, some of whom have been bulimic for as long as 20 years. While the specific prevalence in older age groups has not yet been determined, population surveys have uncovered few older bulimic patients (Goodman, Blinder, Chaitin, & Hagman, 1988; Russell, 1979).

Many cases of bulimia may go unreported in women older than 30. However, it may be that the cohort in which an American woman is born might be a significant variable in determining whether she will develop an eating disorder. Ideals of female attractiveness have changed dramatically over the last 130 years, and there may be significant cohort differences in the preferred body figures of men and women reflecting the ideals of attractiveness in different times.

An important study was conducted by Rozin and Fallon (1988), who measured body image, eating behaviors, and attitudes from male and female college students and their biological parents. With the exception of the sons, the other three groups considered their present body shape to be heavier than their ideal body shape. Both groups of women felt men (of their own cohort) preferred very thin women. The ideal female figure for the men was heavier than the women's ideal body shape for women. Fathers and sons were relatively unconcerned about eating and weight. Daughters, mothers, and fathers were similar in their perception that they

were too heavy. The investigators concluded that the main factor in weight concern was gender and not generation or discrepancy between the subjects' perception of current and ideal body shape.

In the present study the investigators were interested in investigating the responses of four groups of subjects: Volunteer male and female college students in general psychology, and men and women over the age of 39. The older cohort was reared during the 1940s and 1950s, the Susan Hayworth, Marilyn Monroe, and Jayne Mansfield era. Unlike Rozin's and Fallon's subjects who were parents of the college subjects, the subjects in this study, to the best of our knowledge, were not related by blood or marriage. In the Rozin and Fallon study a confounding between cohort factors and the fact that the younger subjects were reared in the homes of the older subjects might have occurred. The principle finding in the Rozin and Fallon study was that gender rather than cohort difference, with respect to concern about weight, was of greater importance. The present study reexamined this finding permitting the investigators to reassess the relative roles of gender and cohort in subjects who were not related. It was hypothesized that significant cohort differences would be found.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

Questionnaires were administered to volunteers from general psychology classes, public school teachers over the age of 39, and to men and women from a middle-class pre-retirement village. The students' questionnaires were collected immediately after they were completed. The teachers and the pre-retirement village subjects mailed their completed forms to the investigators. One hundred percent of the questionnaires were returned.

The students who participated in the study were predominantly white, with only two African American students in the volunteer student group. Most of the students were from southern, middle-class, Protestant backgrounds. These students are representative of college students in the geographic region and in the nation.

The older group of subjects were predominantly all white southerners who were from middle-class, Protestant backgrounds. Only two African Americans volunteered to be in this group. They, too, were representative of parents of college students.

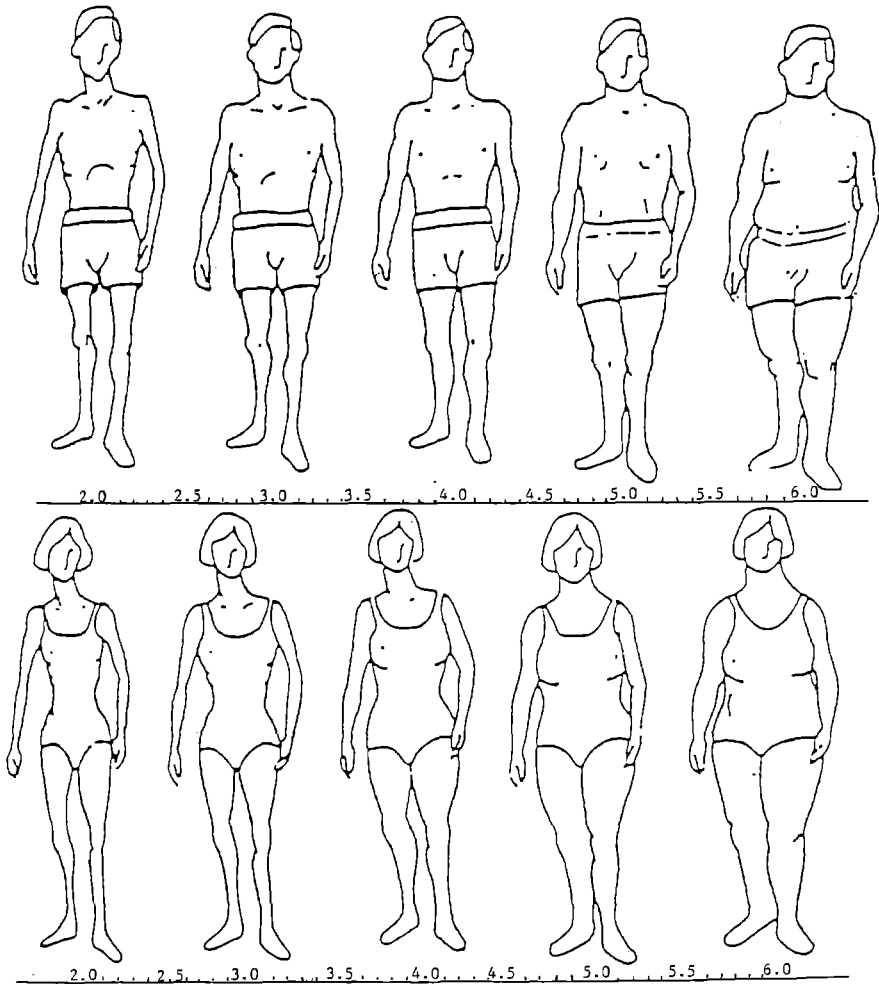


Fig. 1. Stunkard Body Shape Figures Scale.

### *Procedures*

The subjects were asked the questions in Table I and were instructed to indicate their answer by marking the silhouette in the Stunkard Body Shape Figure Scale on the same page that best corresponded to their perception.

There was a demographic questionnaire that asked the subject's height, weight, gender, and age. For the young women the mean height

was 5'4" and mean weight was 125 pounds, while the older women's mean height was 5'4" and their mean weight was 147 pounds. The mean height for the young men was 5'9" and mean weight was 165 pounds, and for the older men the mean height was 5'9" and weight of 181 pounds. The subjects consisted of 73 college students, and 88 adults over the age of 39. There were 39 males and 34 females in the college sample, and 46 males and 42 females in the older adult sample. The average age of the college men and women was 20 years. The average age of the older women was 47 and for the older men it was 53. No subjects in the college sample were over 22 years of age. The range of ages for the older subjects was between 40 to 65 years of age. Although most of the younger and older female subjects indicated that they wished they were thinner than they actually were, none of the female or male subjects were clinically obese. All subjects were shown eight sets of figure drawings designed by and illustrated in Stunkard, Sorenson, and Schlusiner (1980), and identical to the ones used by Fallon and Rozin (1985). (See Fig. 1 and Table II.) The Stunkard Body Shape Figures Scale set consists of 10 silhouettes of men and women ranging from extremely thin to obese. Subjects were instructed to select the silhouette that most similarly corresponded to the silhouette of the body figure to which the subjects were asked a series of body figure questions (Stunkard, *et al.*, 1980).

## RESULTS

In comparing the younger and older women, (see Table I), significant differences were found between the means of the two groups on their current figures [ $F(1, 74) = 12.02, p < .001$ ]. Older women reported having stouter figures than the younger subjects. An examination of Table I indicates a significant difference between the two groups of women regarding what they would like to look like [ $F(1, 74) = 17.85, p < .000$ ]. Both female groups said that they would like to be much thinner, but the college women indicated a preference for a much thinner figure than did the older women. The female figures the women believed most attractive to the largest number of males their age [ $F(1, 74) = 9.70, p < .003$ ] showed that both female groups believed men were most attracted to thinner female figures. The thinnest female figure the women believed would be acceptable to most women their age [ $F(1, 74) = 8.60, p < .004$ ] was thinner for the college than for the older female group. They also differed on the thinnest male figure that would be acceptable to women of their age groups [ $F(1, 74) = 3.69, p < .058$ ], showing that

Table I. Means Scores Between the Two Age Groups in the Same Sex

	Women		Men	
	y	o	y	o
1. Put an X under the drawing which best depicts your current figure.	3.41 <sup>a</sup>	4.30	3.92 <sup>a</sup>	5.15
2. Put an O under the drawing which you would most like to look like.	2.55 <sup>a</sup>	3.26	4.28	4.40
3. Put a Z under the figure of the <i>opposite sex</i> that you find most attractive.	3.488	4.11	3.20 <sup>a</sup>	3.75
4. Put a P under the <i>opposite sex</i> figure which you believe would be most attractive to the <i>greatest number</i> of members of <i>your sex</i> who are about your age.	3.97	4.19	3.02 <sup>a</sup>	3.52
5. Put an S under the figure of your sex which you believe would be most attractive to the <i>greatest number</i> of members of the <i>opposite sex</i> who are about your age.	2.73 <sup>a</sup>	3.23	3.61	3.97
6. Put an A under the <i>thinnest figure</i> which would be acceptable to you in a member of the opposite sex who is about your age.	2.64 <sup>b</sup>	2.97	2.41 <sup>a</sup>	2.90
7. Place a B under the <i>heaviest figure</i> which you believe would be acceptable to you in a member of the opposite sex who is about your age.	5.08	5.19	4.23 <sup>a</sup>	5.11
8. Place a D under the <i>thinnest figure</i> which you believe would be acceptable to most members of <i>your sex</i> who are about your age.	2.08 <sup>a</sup>	2.66	2.21 <sup>a</sup>	2.88

<sup>a</sup> Significant difference at  $p < .01$ .<sup>b</sup> Significant difference at  $p < .05$ .



**Table II.** Mean Ratings Between the Two Age Groups in the Same Gender in Rozin and Fallon's 1988 Study

	Daughter	Mother	Son	Father
1. Current figure	3.40	3.90	3.80	4.90
2. Ideal figure	2.80	3.00	4.00	4.05
3. Most attractive to opposite sex	2.75	2.85	3.65	3.80
4. Most attractive to opposite sex as rated by the opposite sex	3.30	3.35	3.65	3.60

the college women indicated a preference for a thinner male figure than did the older females.

Among the two groups of men (see Table I), significant differences were found between the two groups' current figures [ $F(1, 81) = 33.37, p < .000$ ], with the older men indicating a stouter figure than did the college men. Another significant difference between the two groups was the female figure the men found to be most attractive [ $F(1, 81) = 17.37, p < .000$ ]. The older men indicated a preference for a heavier female figure than did the college men. The female figure the men believed would be most attractive to the greatest number of men their age [ $F(1, 81) = 11.51, p < .001$ ] showed the older men selecting a heavier figure than did the younger men. The thinnest female figure that would be acceptable to men in women who were about their age [ $F(1, 80) = 10.44, p < .002$ ] showed that the older men selected a heavier figure than did the younger men. The men also differed regarding the heaviest figure they would find acceptable in women who were about their age [ $F(1, 80) = 14.92, p < .000$ ], with the older men selecting a heavier figure than did the younger men.

## DISCUSSION

In the present study the college women, older women, and older men considered their present body shape to be heavier than their ideal body figure. Only the college men were satisfied with their current body figures. These findings were consistent with the findings of the Rozin and Fallon (1988) study. In the latter, the sons considered their current and ideal body figures to be essentially the same while in the present study the college men considered their ideal body figure to be heavier than their current body figure. In both studies, the groups of women believed men of their own cohort preferred very thin women. As was true in Rozin and Fallon

(1988; Table II), the ideal female figure for the men was not as thin as the women's ideal figure was for women.

While the daughters in Rozin and Fallon's study (1988) and the college women in the present study indicated the same current body figure, the mothers in Rozin and Fallon's (1988) considered their current figure to be thinner than the older women did in the present study. The daughters and mothers in Rozin and Fallon's (1988; Table II) considered their ideal figures to be heavier than the college women, while the mothers considered their ideal figure to be thinner than did the older women in the present study.

As indicated in the Results, significant cohort differences did occur among the four groups. For the college and the older women subjects, significant cohort differences were found not only in their average current figures and preferred figures, but also in the figures they believed most men their age would judge to be most attractive. A cohort difference regarding the thinnest figure acceptable to the women in a man who was about their age was also found. Among the men, significant differences were found in the men's current body figures. Differences were also found between the figures of women the two groups found most attractive, the female figures that they believed would be most attractive to the greatest number of men who were about their age, the thinnest figures that would be acceptable to them in a female who was about their age, and the heaviest figures that would be acceptable to them in a female who was about their age. They differed as well on the thinnest figures that they believed would be most acceptable to most men who were about their ages.

There are several possible reasons cohort differences were found in this study, but not in the Rozin and Fallon (1988) study. The subjects in the Fallon and Rozin study were college students from the University of Pennsylvania and their parents. Their shared biology could have contributed to the finding of gender, but not cohort differences. In addition, over one-half of the Fallon and Rozin subjects were Jewish. As the authors in that study noted, there were trends in their study that indicated greater weight concern among the Jewish subjects (Fallon & Rozin, 1985).

Another influencing factor could be that the Fallon and Rozin's (1985) study involved family members. One of the functions of a family is to instill in younger members a sense of the parent's values and shared ideals. Preferred body figures could be influenced by similar shared values, ideals, and expectations of what is desirable and attractive in body figures of men and women.

Another influence is that the data in the present study were collected in coastal communities. Thus, a self-selection process favoring thinner female body figures among the college women and a heavier body figure among the college men might have occurred. It might also be that the preferred ratings of the older subjects reflect the ideals of preferred body images of the cohort into which they were born. However, it is difficult to separate cohort differences from developmental differences. Therefore, in a future study the younger sample will be asked which figure(s) they would find attractive when they become the age of the older sample. If cohort differences are separate from developmental differences, hopefully this question will demonstrate them.

People tend to become heavier as they get older (Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990). Therefore, heavier body figures considered "attractive" or "acceptable" could reflect the older subjects' more realistic expectations both for themselves as well as for the opposite gender of their cohort. While both men and women might ideally find thinner figures more desirable, in general, reflecting the prevailing thinness value in our culture, they might also know that in reality it is not the most "attractive" figure(s) in and for members of their cohort. Additionally, the ideal of thinness might have another concept other than "attractiveness." In other words, "thinnest" may not be the most likely explanation of "attractive" to people of different cohorts. An additional explanation for the differences between the two studies may relate to the weight of the older subjects. The perceived current figures of the older women and the older men were heavier than the mothers' and fathers' weights in Rozin and Fallon's study. Since ideal figures tend to increase with actual figure, this fact may account for the significant differences in this study's findings.

Yet the cohort differences found in this study might reflect a true cohort effect exemplified in the Twiggy phenomena of the middle to late 1960s. It might, also, reflect a cohort effect mirroring the values of the time the subjects were born. For the older subjects the stereotypes of desirable body figures, as exemplified by Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield, and Gary Cooper, would reflect this preference for heavier, fuller body figures and a different set of values by the older subjects compared to the stereotypes of desirable body figures of the younger cohort.

Numerous studies have indicated that the frequency of anorexia nervosa increased significantly during the period beginning in the late 1960s and extending into the early 1980s. As noted earlier, what is indicated is that the rates for anorexia among the general population increased by a factor of at least two. Perhaps the prevalence of anorexia can best be understood not by examining the general population, but looking at those people most at risk for the disorder, adolescent women.

The case for the increasing frequency of normal-weight bulimia is striking. Between 13% and 15% of college populations meet DSM-III criteria for bulimia (Gordon, 1988).

Possible implications for treatment of eating disorders would include stressing the importance of discussions regarding the changing psychosocial conflicts and issues with the younger generation of eating disordered women. Specifically, topics that should be discussed either one-on-one with a therapist or in group therapy would include the changing expectations for women in our culture during the last 20 years, Madison Avenue's marketing of the ideal of thinness by the fashion industry, women's lack of experience dealing with criticism, confrontation, rejection, and the expectation that women will and must actively compete with men in the marketplace. Young girls and women must be made aware of the unrealistic conflicts our culture has placed on them, and they must be made aware of the deadly costs of being expected to act as traditional women and play as men.

The finding of cohort differences may help explain the large number of reported cases of anorexia and bulimia among younger American women during the last two decades. This study is, of course, preliminary. Future longitudinal study may clarify whether the differences found reflect a developmental or cohort effect.

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