

BOOK REVIEW

Body Image: Understanding body image dissatisfaction in men, women and children

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This book investigates men's and women's body image, focusing in particular on cultural influences on body image, and on degree of body satisfaction and dissatisfaction in men and women of different ages. Theory and data from psychology, sociology, women's studies and media studies are integrated to address the question of how men and women experience body shape and weight. It was argued that body dissatisfaction is normative in women in the Western world from eight years of age upwards, and that this has a significant impact on behavior such that most women try to change their shape and weight, and many women avoid activities that would involve exposing their bodies. Body image in men was also investigated. Boys from as young as eight years old also show concern over being the 'right' shape, and many adult men's self-esteem is related to how good they feel about their body shape.

The author argued that Western culture prescribes a narrow range of body shapes as acceptable for men and women, and that those whose body shape and size falls outside this range may encounter prejudice, especially if they are heavier than is culturally acceptable. The debate as to the basis for current Western cultural ideals is reviewed. Arguments from the biological determinist perspective (suggesting a biological basis for body shape preferences), and from social psychology and sociology (stressing cultural relativity), are evaluated. An historical review of trends during this century shows how cultural ideas of acceptable body shape have changed radically over the years, particularly for women. Myths about weight and health are

questioned, and the impact of the dieting industry on the lives of men and women is examined.

She specifically looked at body dissatisfaction in women. Different techniques that have been used to assess satisfaction are evaluated, along with findings based on each technique, to determine the extent of body dissatisfaction and the reasons why women are dissatisfied. Women's attempts to modify their bodies through plastic surgery, dieting, exercise and body-building are investigated, reflecting on data from psychology, sociology and women's studies. There is a review of cultural pressures on women to conform to the socially acceptable 'slim but shapely' body shape, drawing mostly on work from contemporary feminist writers on the social construction of femininity.

Grogan focuses on body satisfaction in men. Most previous work on body satisfaction has focused on women. A review of men's body satisfaction is timely in the light of recent arguments that there has been a cultural shift in the 1980s and 1990s such that men are under increased social pressure to be slender and muscular. Men's satisfaction is evaluated, using work from sociology and psychology and introducing fresh data from interviews with young men, to determine whether men seem to be aware of societal pressures, and whether these pressures impact on their body satisfaction. Current work on body-building and anabolic steroid use is reviewed, to understand the psychological and social effects of becoming more muscular, and the motivations behind taking anabolic steroids in spite of negative side effects. Work on the social construction of masculinity is reviewed, to produce a picture of social pressures on men, and to evaluate the extent of recent cultural changes on men's acceptance of their body shape and size.

She described the effects of media pressure. Theory and data from psychology, sociology and media studies are discussed in relation to effects of exposure to idealized media images of attractive photographic models. Content analyses of media portrayal of the male and female body are reviewed. Mass Communication Models are then evaluated, with reference to 'Effects' and 'Uses and Gratifications' models. Empirical evidence of the direct effects of observing media imagery is reviewed and evaluated, with special reference to two of the most influential psychological theories in this area: Social Comparison Theory and Self Schema Theory.

Data from laboratory experiments are complemented by data from interviews to evaluate the mechanisms through which media role models may affect body satisfaction in men and women. Recent developments are discussed, in which representatives of various media have reflected on the use of slender models, along with ideas for reducing the effects of media imagery based on current psychological and sociological theories.

She wisely investigates the effects of age, ethnicity, social class and sexuality on body satisfaction. Questionnaire studies which have charted changes in satisfaction throughout the lifespan are discussed, along with relevant data from interviews carried out with children and adolescents specifically for this book. Dissatisfaction is identified in the accounts provided by children as young as eight years old, and reasons for this dissatisfaction are discussed. There is discussion of ethnicity and body dissatisfaction, evaluating claims that black women are more satisfied with their body shape and size in the context of a sub-culture where plumpness may be perceived as attractive and erotic. Social class differences in body satisfaction are discussed within a social context that associates slenderness with the middle and upper classes, especially for women. The historical link between slenderness and social class is explored. Finally, differences in body satisfaction in heterosexual men and women, gay men and lesbians were investigated. Research from sociology and psychology, looking at different sub-cultural pressures, was investigated, and this section included an evaluation of evidence suggesting that the lesbian sub-culture protects against body dissatisfaction.

This book has been an attempt to present a balanced account of current research on body image in men, women and children. It has been necessarily selective. Most of the research that is cited comes from the realm of psychology, since most empirical work on body image has been carried out by psychologists. Where possible, data from other social sciences was also presented. The result is a comprehensive review of the variety of influences on men's and women's body image, and the behavioral effects of these influences. People most at risk for body dissatisfaction are those who belong to identified at-risk groups (white heterosexual women, and gay men), who have low self-esteem, and who perceive a lack of control over body image. Media representations of the slender ideal (slender and muscular for men) may lead to unfavorable social comparisons, and may result in dissatisfaction.

The book is persistently intellectual in its style and bringing out the socio cultural influences as the context to explain the psychological experiences. The book presents the cogent and inspiring review of the research conducted on the subject leaving new areas of further research.