

Associations among Body Image, Relationship Experiences, and Sexual Intimacy within Romantic Couples

Laura B. Goins & Charlotte N. Markey
Rutgers University

Abstract

This study examined associations among 106 heterosexual romantic couples' ratings of body satisfaction, relationship quality, and sexual intimacy. Existing body image literature suggests that our social experiences contribute to our body image (e.g., Markey, 2004), yet few studies have examined the extent to which our body image and our perceptions of others' bodies are associated with our romantic relationships. Further, although some literature suggests that our perceptions of our bodies may be linked to our sexuality, research has yet to examine this relation within the context of romantically involved couples. Results are consistent with predictions regarding associations among body image scores and associations among weight status and body image. Analyses indicate that men's ratings of their relationships were positively associated with their perceptions of their own and their partners' bodies; specifically, men reported more satisfaction with their partners' bodies when they perceived more love and harmony in their romantic relationship. Further, reports of sexual intimacy within the relationship were linked to men's body image and not women's. Findings are discussed in terms of the role of gender in understanding both relationships and body image.

Introduction

- Body image is an important aspect of individuals' personal and social health and intuitively seems to be relevant to both sexual intimacy and satisfaction in romantic relationships.
- In spite of these potential relations, few studies have examined these variables together in a single study and research has yet to examine these variables among exclusive romantic couples.
- These variables seem related given existing research indicating that individuals who are more satisfied with their selves (including body image) report a greater frequency of sex and greater overall relationship satisfaction (Ackard, Kearney-Cooke, Peterson, 2000).
- Further, research indicates that individual's own body satisfaction is significantly related to how satisfied they perceive their partners to be with their bodies (Markey, Markey, Birch, 2004).
- Existing literature regarding these variables is largely hypothetical given that no other studies (to our knowledge) have examined body image, relationship satisfaction, and sexual intimacy among current romantic dyads (previous studies have examined only one member of a couple).

Aims

- This study will extend prior research linking body image to relationship experiences and to sexuality by assessing *both* romantic partners in terms of the following questions:
 - Are romantic partners' body image scores associated (i.e., are men's body satisfaction scores associated with their partners' satisfaction with their bodies)?
 - Are men's and women's body satisfaction ratings associated with their weight status (i.e. BMI)?
 - Are men's and women's body satisfaction ratings associated with their relationship quality (i.e., love & conflict in their relationships)?
 - Are men's and women's body satisfaction ratings associated with their sexual intimacy in their relationship?

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goins520@camden.rutgers.edu
chmarkey@camden.rutgers.edu

Method

Participants

- 106 heterosexual romantic dyads (n=212)
- Women's mean age=23.70 years, Men's mean age=25.68 years
- Predominantly Euro-American (70% women, 76% men)
- Diverse socioeconomic backgrounds
- Recruited from a northeastern university campus

Measures

- **Weight Status**
 - Body Mass Index (BMI) = (weight(kg)/height²(m))
 - Participants' average BMI was 25.87
- **Body Image**
 - Participants were asked to indicate their own body satisfaction, their perceptions of their partners' satisfaction with their bodies and their actual satisfaction with their partners' bodies using the Contour Drawing Rating Scale (CDRS; Thompson & Gray, 1995)
- **Relationship Quality**
 - Participants indicated relationship satisfaction with ratings related to love and conflict using the Marital Interactions Scale (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). Revisions were made to account for couples who were not married (i.e., cohabitating or dating). Composite scores were created for the two scales (love and conflict) that included men's and women's ratings.
- **Sexual Intimacy**
 - This measure was created for the purposes of this study using items from three different surveys. Participants indicated how sexually intimate they are with their partner (Marital Interactions Scale; Braiker and Kelley, 1979), how open they are with their partner regarding their sexual relationship (Marital Self-Disclosure Questionnaire; Waring, Holding and Wesley, 1998), and how much sexual agreement they have with their partner (Locke-Wallace Scale; Locke & Wallace, 1959). A composite score was computed that includes all 3 of men's ratings and all 3 of women's ratings (i.e., 6 ratings total).

Results

Table 1: Examining Aim #1 (associations among partners' body image scores) and Aim #2 (relations among body image scores and Body Mass Index (BMI))

	Relations Among Body Satisfaction Scores & BMI		
	Body Mass Index (BMI)	Men's Perceptions of Women's Satisfaction	Women's Actual Satisfaction w/ Men's Body
Men's Own Body Satisfaction	-.638*	.730*	.647*
Men's Perception of Women's Satisfaction	-.457*	---	.632*
Women's Actual Satisfaction w/ Men's Body	-.538*	.632*	---

Note: Somewhat similar findings among the females in this sample are reported in Markey & Markey, 2006

Table 2: Examining Aim #3 (associations among body satisfaction ratings and relationship quality)

	Partners' Actual Satisfaction with Other's Body & Relationship Items	
	Male & Female Composite Love Score	Male & Female Composite Conflict Score
Satisfaction with PARTNER's Body	.19* / -.014	-.26* / .16

Note: Men's results left of diagonal, Women's results right of diagonal; * indicates significant result

-Relationship quality measures were not significantly associated with any of the women's body satisfaction scores, but were significantly related to the men's satisfaction with their partners' bodies.

Table 3: Examining Aim #4: (associations among body satisfaction ratings and sexual intimacy)

	Body Satisfaction & Sexual Intimacy	
	Men	Women
OWN Body Satisfaction	.21*	-.15
PERCEPTION of Partner's Satisfaction	.23*	-.01
Satisfaction with PARTNER's Body	.20*	.13

*indicates significant result

Discussion

-Men's and women's body satisfaction ratings were associated. Of particular interest in this study, men's sat with their own bodies, perceptions of partners' sat with their bodies and partners' actual sat with their bodies were all highly correlated. This suggests that, in contrast to some reports regarding women, men appear to realize the extent to which their partners' are satisfied with their bodies (For further discussion of results for women, see Markey & Markey, 2006.)

-As expected, body satisfaction ratings were associated with weight status. Participants who maintained relatively higher BMIs tended to be less sat with their bodies than participants who maintained relatively lower BMIs.

-No significant associations between women's body sat scores and the love and conflict in their relationships were found. However, men's body sat scores were associated with the love and conflict in their relationship such that men's satisfaction with their partners' bodies was associated with more love and less conflict in their relationships.

- No significant associations between women's body satisfaction scores and the sexual intimacy in their relationships were found. However, men's body satisfaction scores were associated with the sexual intimacy in their relationships, such that greater sexual intimacy (based on both partners' reports) was associated with greater body satisfaction ratings.

Conclusions

-Although the study of women's body image has dominated the body image literature, this study suggests that understanding men's body image in the context of their relationships may be important. In particular, it appears that men's own body satisfaction is associated with the sexual intimacy in their relationships. Perhaps, men feel better about their bodies when they feel sexually connected to their partners.

-Men's satisfaction with their partners' bodies was associated with their relationship quality and sexual intimacy in their relationships. Perhaps men –and not women– may find their partners' bodies more attractive when their relationship experiences are more satisfying.

-This research and further studies that should help explicate these findings have the potential to add to our understanding of not only body image but also the importance of romantic relationship experiences to both men's and women's health.