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Abstract

Although social influences are implicated in the development of body image, research has yet to address the roles of women's sexual orientation and romantic partners' weight statuses in predicting women's body image. This study examines both heterosexual ($n = 104$) and lesbian ($n = 144$) women and their partners' body mass indexes and body image using actor-partner interdependence models. The results indicated that lesbian women preferred larger body ideals than heterosexual women and that women's ideal body preferences were not related to their partners' weight status. However, both lesbian and heterosexual women's perceptions of their actual body size were related to their partners' weight status such that heavier women who had relatively thin partners were most at risk of perceiving themselves as overweight.

Keywords

Body image, gender, lesbian women, partner comparison effect, romantic partners

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Although recent research suggests that boys and men are increasingly vulnerable to body dissatisfaction, weight concerns, and disordered eating, girls and women appear to be most vulnerable to subclinical and clinical manifestations of these problems (Frederick, Peplau, & Lever, 2006; Frederick et al., 2007; McCreary & Sasse, 2000; Swami et al., 2010). Reasons for this gender difference have been offered, ranging from the media's focus on women's appearance (in particular, thinness; Markey & Markey, 2010) to family socialization experiences concerning eating (Birch et al., 2001). A possibility that has received relatively little attention in the body image literature (for exceptions, see Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Siever, 1994) is that girls and women are concerned about their bodies and weight because they are invested in attracting male partners. In other words, heterosexual women's body dissatisfaction and related concerns may be a result, in part, of their desire to appear attractive to male partners (Frederick et al., 2007). In contrast, lesbian girls and women, although still interested in attracting partners, may value different physical qualities and may be held to different beauty ideals by female partners (i.e., ideals that place less emphasis on thinness). In an attempt to elucidate the potential role of women's partners in determining women's own body image, the current research focuses on both heterosexual and lesbian women and their partners' weight statuses and body image. This study will not only explore body image in the context of romantic relationships, but will attempt to understand the extent to which women's body image may be influenced by the gender of their partners. In other words, are lesbian women protected from body dissatisfaction because they are partnered with women?

A growing body of research has established links between relationship experiences and body image and weight concerns among heterosexual couples (Markey & Markey, 2006, 2011; Meltzer, McNulty, Novak, Butler, & Karney, 2011). However, to our knowledge, this is among the first investigations aimed at exploring body image in the context of romantic relationships among both heterosexual and lesbian partners. This research builds on our past findings linking weight status and weight concerns among both heterosexual and lesbian romantic partners. In these studies (Markey & Markey, 2011, 2013), we have found that women are at risk of experiencing weight concerns when they are relatively heavier than their partners. In order to account for these findings, we proposed a model called the "partner comparison effect" (Markey & Markey, 2013). According to this model, individuals' perceptions of themselves are influenced by their comparison of themselves relative to their partner. In other words, partner comparison seems to result not merely as a result of a partner's attributes, but as a result of the partner's attributes (in this case weight status) in comparison with the individual's attributes. When the partner maintains a socioculturally desirable attribute (i.e., "thinness") and the individual does not, then this places the individual at risk of concern about this attribute (i.e., concern about weight). However, these past analyses have not been able to clarify the extent to which these comparison processes are a result of individuals wishing to be thinner or perceiving themselves as heavy. Although seemingly related possibilities, they are conceptually and empirically distinct in that women may perceive themselves as heavy, but not necessarily desire weight loss. Furthermore, women may not perceive themselves as heavy but desire weight loss. Thus, the present study will examine potential influences on both lesbian and heterosexual women's body image: their own, their romantic partners', and the combined influence of both partners' weight status.

Sexual orientation and body image

Past research has documented gay men's vulnerability to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (e.g., Bosley, 2011; Smith, Hawkeswood, Bodell, & Joiner, 2011; Wiseman & Moradi, 2010; for a discussion of limitations of this research see Kane, 2010). However, there is relatively less research examining these issues among lesbian women and the research that is available provides conflicting information. In particular, there has been speculation that identification with lesbian culture may serve a protective function against body dissatisfaction (Huxley, Clarke, & Halliwell, 2011); however, findings examining lesbian women's vulnerability to body dissatisfaction (and related eating disorders) remain mixed. Peplau et al. (2009) have reported few differences ($d = .07$) between lesbian and heterosexual women's body dissatisfaction. Morrison, Morrison, and Sager's (2004) earlier meta-analysis indicated that lesbian women have only slightly higher body satisfaction than their heterosexual peers ($d = .12$, $n = 2839$ lesbian and heterosexual women). Owens, Hughes, and Owens-Nicholson (2003) have similarly suggested that sexual orientation is at best a modest predictor of body dissatisfaction among women, with actual weight status (i.e., body mass index (BMI)) being a much stronger predictor.

In contrast to this research suggesting that there are virtually no differences between heterosexual and lesbian women's body image, Polemni, Austin, and Kavanagh (2009) have found evidence that lesbian women were less likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies than their heterosexual peers and more likely to engage in healthy weight control practices. Furthermore, research suggests that lesbian women may be relatively less invested in their appearance or less concerned with sociocultural ideals of female attractiveness than heterosexual women, thus less dissatisfied with their own appearances (Share & Mintz, 2002; Wagenbach, 2003). Some research (see French et al., 1996) has suggested that lesbian women may experience positive body images, but may not be protected from maladaptive eating behaviors such as frequent dieting, bingeing, and purging. Furthermore, qualitative research has suggested that lesbian women may feel exempt from some standards of attractiveness that heterosexual women are subjected to and, instead, feel subjected to standards upheld by the lesbian community (Black, 2007). Some lesbian women may experience internal conflict in trying to meet ideals established by both heterosexual and lesbian cultures (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, & Striegel-Moore, 1997). The inconsistencies in findings from these studies call for further exploration as to *why* differences may sometimes emerge in lesbian versus heterosexual women's body dissatisfaction.

Perhaps, the most consistent point made in the research examining lesbian women's body image is that lesbian women are aware of societal expectations of thinness and vulnerable to these expectations (Bergeron & Senn, 1998; Cogan, 1999; Heffernan, 1996). Although attraction to women may serve some protective function as may the affiliation with the lesbian community, neither of these factors seems to completely eliminate lesbian women's body dissatisfaction (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, & Grilo, 1996). In other words, being lesbian does not entirely change the way a woman experiences her body or the other complex factors that contribute to her body image (Gettelman & Thompson, 1993; Pitman, 2000). As Morrison and McCutcheon (2011) have recently articulated, research is needed

that goes beyond simple comparisons of individuals' body image based on broad indices of sexual orientation; research is needed that examines factors that may contribute to within group differences and the similarities among lesbian and heterosexual women. In the present study, the inclusion of women and their partners will extend the current literature focusing on women's sexuality—and presumably the role of being in a relationship with the same or opposite-sex partner—by considering dynamics experienced in women's relationships.

Qualitative research ($n = 15$ participants) examining lesbian women's discussion of their partners' influences on their feelings about their bodies suggests the potential importance of examining these issues among same-sex partners (Huxley et al., 2011). Huxley and colleagues (2011) have indicated that same-sex relationships may both positively and negatively influence women's body image. Lesbian women report valuing physical attractiveness in a partner, but define physical attractiveness somewhat differently than their heterosexual peers (Heffernan, 1999). Specifically, lesbian women report valuing physical functionality as central to attractiveness relatively more than their heterosexual peers (i.e., physical condition and strength; Few, 2001; Heffernan, 1999). Regardless of the qualities that contribute to their perception of bodily attractiveness, lesbian women's body image (similar to heterosexual women's body image) has been discussed as critical to their ability to experience intimacy in their romantic relationships (Pfeffer, 2008) and relationship satisfaction has been linked to body satisfaction among partners (Sheets & Ajmere, 2005).

Actor-partner interdependence models

The current study examines the associations among women's weight status, their partners' weight status, and their body image (both how they think they currently look and how they would ideally like to look). Because the current study utilizes data from both partners of a romantic dyad, traditional statistical techniques are not appropriate. Therefore, actor-partner interdependence models (APIMs; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2008) will be employed in order to account for the dependency in these data. APIMs are statistical methods that make it possible to examine how Person A's criterion variable simultaneously and independently relates to her predictor variable and to her partner's (Person B's) predictor variable.

Figure 1 depicts a typical APIM with dyads (e.g., Person A and Person B) and two variables, X (e.g., BMI) and Y (e.g., body image), for each dyad member. In this model, the association between Person A's X variable and Person A's Y variable is called the "actor effect." In the current study, the actor effects would represent the association between Person A's weight status (BMI) and Person A's own body image (the body she would like to ideally look like or the body she thinks she currently looks like; these outcomes are investigated separately). In Figure 1, the association between Person A's X variable and Person B's Y variable is called the "partner effect." The partner effect in the current study is represented by the association between Person A's weight status (i.e., BMI) and Person B's body image (the body she would like to ideally look like and the body she thinks she currently looks like). Both the actor and partner effects can be estimated using either unstandardized regression slopes or standardized coefficients (partial correlations). When

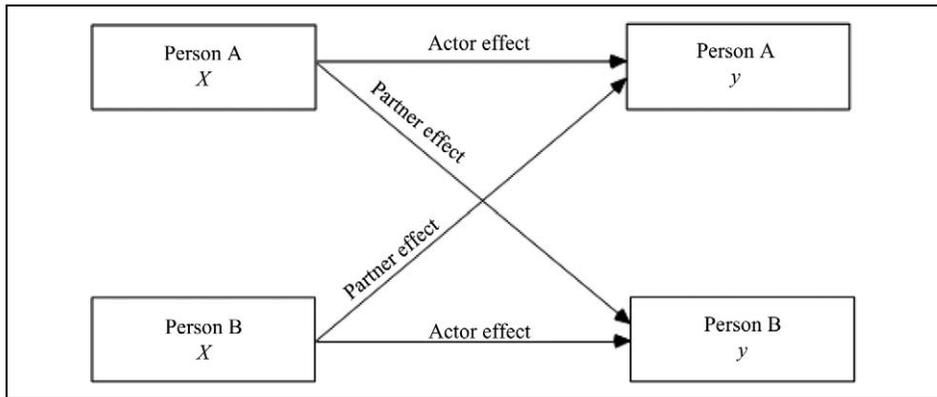


Figure 1. Actor-partner interdependence model.

partial correlations are computed for actor and partner effects, they can be interpreted in a manner similar to a Pearson's r .

In addition to examining actor and partner effects, APIMs also make it possible to examine the extent to which dissimilarity among Person A and Person B's weight status predicts Person A and Person B's body image, respectively. This "dissimilarity effect" can be investigated by examining the simple interaction between Person A's weight status and Person B's weight status. Finally, participants' sexual orientation can be used to both predict body image and to examine if it moderates actor, partner, or dissimilarity effects of BMI. The current study will employ APIMs in order to examine hypotheses related to women's ideal body type (i.e., what they would like to ideally look like) and hypotheses related to women's perceived body type (i.e., what they believe they currently look like).

Ideal body-type hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 (sexual orientation): After controlling for participants' weight status, it is expected that heterosexual women will report having a thinner ideal body than will lesbian women.

Hypothesis 2 (actor effect): Women who are thin will tend to desire a thinner body than women who are heavy (i.e., participants' *ideal body* perception will be positively related to their own weight status). Such a prediction is consistent with previous research indicating a positive relationship between weight status and weight goals (compare Williamson, Serdula, Anda, Levy, & Byers, 1992).

Hypothesis 3 (partner effect): Women who have romantic partners who are thin will tend to want to look thinner than women in relationships with heavy partners (i.e., participants' *ideal body* will be positively related to their partners' weight status).

Hypothesis 4 (dissimilarity effect): Consistent with social comparison theory, our past findings, and our discussion of a partner comparison effect (Markey & Markey, 2013), it is expected that women who are relatively heavy and who have a romantic partner who is relatively thin will likely desire to be thinner (i.e., participants' own

weight statuses and their romantic partners' weight statuses will significantly interact with each other when predicting participants' ideal body perceptions).

Perceived body-type hypotheses

Hypothesis 5 (actor effect): It is expected that women with higher BMIs will think their bodies look heavier than women who are relatively thin (i.e., participants' *current body* perception will be positively related to their own weight status).

Hypothesis 6 (partner effect): Women in relationships with partners who are thin will also tend to think they look heavier than women in relationships with partners who are heavy (i.e., participants' *current body* perceptions will be negatively related to their partners' weight status).

Hypothesis 7 (dissimilarity effect): Consistent with social comparison theory, and the partner comparison effect (Markey & Markey, 2013), it is expected that women who are relatively heavy and who have a romantic partner who is relatively thin will likely see themselves as relatively heavy (i.e., participants' own weight statuses and their romantic partners' weight statuses will significantly interact with each other when predicting current body perceptions).

In addition to these seven hypotheses, the current study will also examine interactions of sexual orientation with each of the effects discussed above. Because these analyses are primarily exploratory, no specific predictions are made.

Methods

Participants and procedure

Data were collected from 72 lesbian romantic couples and 104 heterosexual romantic couples. Therefore, the final sample consisted of 248 women ($n = 144$ lesbian participants and $n = 104$ heterosexual participants; M age = 29.33 years, $SD = 9.88$ years; different but similar analyses from the heterosexual couples have been published previously, e.g. Markey & Markey, 2006.) Of the total sample, 71% was European American, 13% was African American, 8% was Hispanic, 4% was Asian, and 4% was of an 'other' ethnic background. Both members of romantic dyads participated in the current study, but because the focus of the study is women's body image, only heterosexual men's weight status information is considered. All couples were required to have maintained an exclusive monogamous relationship for at least 6 months. Of all the couples, 69% were cohabitating and, on average, couples had been romantically involved for 4.20 years.

Participants were recruited from a northeastern university campus and the surrounding area by advertising in diverse periodicals and through local health and advocacy groups located in the Philadelphia area. Participants were placed in separate rooms in the researchers' laboratory while they completed the measures used in this study. These methods were approved by an Internal Review Board, where the research took place and participants indicated their voluntary involvement in this research via a consent form.

Measures

Body mass index. In this study, weight status was operationalized using BMI scores ((weight (kg)/height² (m)). Based on the recommendations of Lohman, Roche, and Martorell (1988), three height and weight measurements were collected from each participant by a trained research assistant. Participants' average weight and height were used to calculate their BMIs. In the current study, the average BMI for lesbian women and their partners was 29.38 ($SD = 8.23$), for heterosexual women it was 24.30 ($SD = 5.58$), and for the male partners of heterosexual women it was 27.52 ($SD = 5.96$). Furthermore, both heterosexual ($r = .37, p < .01$) and lesbian (pairwise intraclass $r = .37, p < .01$; Griffin & Gonzalez, 1995) romantic partners' BMIs were significantly correlated.

Body image perceptions. Women's perceptions of their own bodies and ideal bodies were assessed using the Contour Drawing Rating Scale (CDRS; Thompson & Gray, 1995). The scale consists of nine pictorial figures illustrating varying female body sizes of equal gradations. Each figure is labeled with a number, 1–9, with 1 illustrating a *very underweight figure* and 9 illustrating a *very overweight figure*. Frederick, Forbes, and Berezovskaya (2008) have suggested that figures 2, 4, 6, and 8 correspond roughly to people's perceptions of *Very Slender*, *Slender*, *Heavy*, and *Very Heavy*, respectively.

Participating women were given the CDRS depicting female body sizes varying in weight status and questions pertaining to their perceptions of their own and ideal body. Women were asked to select the figures that represent: (1) what they think they currently look like (perceived body size) and (2) what they would like to look like (ideal body size). Although these scores are often used to generate body (dis)satisfaction scores by creating discrepancy scores, we have found this to sometimes obscure the information provided by these ratings (Markey & Markey, 2005). Furthermore, concerns about discrepancy scores including possible failures to capture body distortion have been raised (see Cafri, van den Berg, & Brannick, 2010; Gardner & Brown, 2010). Thus, in this study, we used body ratings of perceived actual and ideal body sizes individually. Although more lengthy measures of body image constructs have some psychometric advantages, past use of this measure has indicated that it is reliable (test–retest reliability of .79; Thompson & Gray, 1995) and that it has predictive validity (Markey & Markey, 2005). Thus, to extend past research examining body image and weight concerns among romantic dyads (e.g., Markey & Markey, 2006, 2011, 2013) and in order to assess women's body perceptions and ideals in a conceptually sound and efficient manner, the CDRS was chosen.

Results

In the current sample, lesbian women tended to be heavier ($t(246) = 5.45, p < .05; d = .69; M = 29.38, SD = 8.23$) and older ($t(246) = 6.33, p < .05; d = .80; M = 33.31, SD = 10.21$) than the heterosexual women ($M = 24.30, SD = 5.58$ and $M = 25.88, SD = 7.32$, respectively). The length of lesbian versus heterosexual romantic relationships was not different ($t(174) = 1.28, p = .19, d = .19$; for lesbian dyads, $M = 4.68$

years, $SD = 3.48$; heterosexual dyads, $M = 3.83$ years, $SD = 4.61$). In the following analyses, the results obtained were similar regardless of the age or length of participants' relationships; thus, to simplify the findings, these variables were excluded from the reported analyses. Multilevel modeling was first used to test an APIM predicting women's ideal bodies (i.e., "body women would like to look like") including only the main effects: actor effects for BMI, partner effects for BMI, and sexual orientation (coded 0 = *lesbian* and 1 = *heterosexual*). Because this model includes sexual orientation as a predictor variable, it will control for the mean difference between lesbian and heterosexual women's BMIs. This model can be used to simultaneously test the unique contributions of actor BMI, partner BMI, and sexual orientation in predicting ideal body and perceived body type.

Ideal body type

Table 1 displays the resulting APIM coefficients when predicting ideal body type and provides a test of Hypotheses 1–4. As expected (Hypothesis 1), sexual orientation was negatively related to women's ideal bodies. This result indicates that, after controlling for BMI, heterosexual women tended to desire thinner bodies than did lesbian women ($r = -.52$). Applying the regression equation yielded from this analysis, it is estimated that, after controlling for the other variables, heterosexual women tended to desire a body size of 3.84, whereas lesbian women selected a body size of 5.06.

Results also indicated that the actor effect of BMI was positively related to women's ideal bodies. This finding is consistent with Hypothesis 2 and suggests that individuals who are thin tend to have thinner body ideals ($r = .48$). Applying the regression equation yielded from this analysis, it is estimated that, after controlling for the other variables, women who were thin (i.e., 1 SD below the mean) tended to desire a body size of 3.59, whereas relatively heavy women (i.e., 1 SD above the mean) desired a body size of 5.31. Contrary to Hypothesis 3, partners' BMIs were unrelated to women's ideal bodies ($r = -.07$).

In order to examine Hypothesis 4, a second APIM analysis was used to investigate the two-way interactions between the actor effect, partner effect, and sexual orientation when predicting women's ideal bodies. To examine the dissimilarity effect (i.e., the within-level actor \times partner interaction), a new variable was created, which was the product of the women's BMIs and their partners' BMIs. As suggested by Aiken and West (1991) and Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2008), BMI was centered when computing the interaction term. This interaction term was then included as an independent variable (called the dissimilarity effect) along with the new cross-level interactions (sexual orientation \times actor effect and sexual orientation \times partner effect) and the main effects (actor effect, partner effect, and sexual orientation) in a new model.

As seen in Table 1, contrary to Hypothesis 4, women who were relatively heavy and who had romantic partners and who were relatively thin did not desire to be thinner than other women ($r = -.10$). The null results yielded for the cross-level interactions between sexual orientation and the actor and partner effects suggest that the main effects found for these variables are similar for both heterosexual and lesbian women ($r_s = .11$ and $-.02$, respectively).

Table 1. Summary of actor–partner interdependence models predicting current and ideal body perceptions.

	Estimate	SE	t	Effect size (r)
Ideal body perceptions				
AE—BMI	.09	.01	8.63**	.48
PE—BMI	−.01	.01	−1.05	−.07
SO	−1.22	.15	−8.10**	−.52
Dissimilarity effect (AE × PE)	−.002	.001	−1.42	−.10
AE × SO	.04	.03	1.65	.11
PE × SO	−.01	.02	−.35	−.02
AE × PE × SO	−.002	.002	−.94	−.07
Current body perceptions				
AE—BMI	.19	.01	15.91**	.70
PE—BMI	−.03	.01	−3.08**	−.20
SO	−.48	.18	−2.64	−.18
Dissimilarity effect (AE × PE)	−.006	.001	−4.13**	−.30
AE × SO	.03	.02	1.60	.10
PE × SO	−.02	.02	−1.17	−.08
AE × PE × SO	−.001	.003	−.59	−.04

SO: sexual orientation; PE: partner effect; AE: actor effect; BMI: body mass index; SE: standard error.

Note. $n = 248$.

** $p < .01$.

Perceived body type

A new set of hierarchical APIMs was then used to examine Hypotheses 5–7 examining the “body women think they look like” or current body perceptions. These results are presented in the bottom half of Table 1. Consistent with Hypotheses 5, women’s current body perception was positively related to their own BMI. In other words, women tended to think their own bodies looked heavy if they had relatively high BMIs ($r = .70$). It is estimated that, after controlling for the other variables, women who were relatively thin (i.e., 1 *SD* below the mean) tended to think they looked like body figure 4.26, whereas relatively heavy women (i.e., 1 *SD* above the mean) perceived themselves as body figure 7.89. As expected (Hypotheses 6), partners’ BMIs were negatively related to women’s body perceptions. Women who had romantic partners with low BMIs tended to think they looked heavier than women with romantic partners who had high BMIs ($r = -.20$). Applying the resulting regression equation, after controlling for the other variables, it is estimated that women who had relatively thin partners (i.e., 1 *SD* below the mean) tended to think they looked like body figure 6.37, whereas women who had relatively heavy partners (i.e., 1 *SD* above the mean) thought they looked like body figure 5.79.

Consistent with Hypothesis 7, an examination of the interaction effects reveals a significant dissimilarity effect when predicting current body perception ($r = -.30$). In order to display this interaction, Figure 2 presents a graphical representation derived by calculating simple regression equations corresponding to individuals scoring at the mean, 1 *SD* above the mean, and 1 *SD* below the mean for each predictor variable (Aiken & West, 1991). Simple slope analyses (see Figure 2) suggest that for all women,

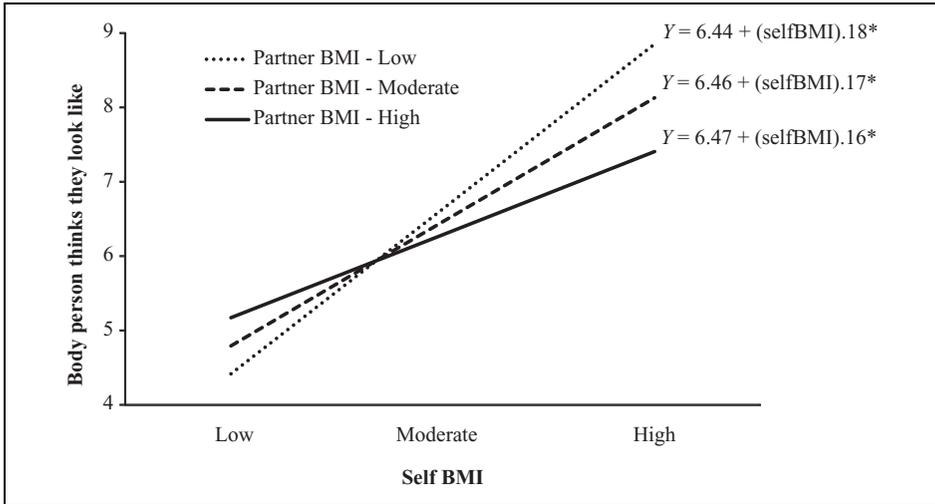


Figure 2. Graphical representation of the dissimilarity effect showing the interaction between women's BMIs and their romantic partners' BMIs when predicting the body women thought they looked like. BMI: body mass index.

regardless of their partners' BMIs, there tends to be a positive relationship between women's own BMIs and the body they think they look like. However, the significant interaction indicates that the strength of this relationship is moderated by their partners' BMIs. As seen in Figure 2 and consistent with Hypothesis 7, women who had relatively high BMIs and were in a romantic relationship with a partner who had a relatively low BMI were at particular risk of perceiving their own bodies as overweight. Finally, as seen in Table 1, sexual orientation did not significantly moderate any of the effects when predicting current body perceptions.

Discussion

This research aimed to examine lesbian and heterosexual women's body image (specifically, their perceptions of their current and ideal bodies) in relation to their own and their partners' weight status. Our goal was to extend past research that has provided a muddled view of the role of sexuality in predicting women's body image by examining women in the context of their relationships. Furthermore, we endeavored to provide additional evidence of partner comparison effects, with women's perceptions of their current and ideal bodies potentially dependent on not only their own but also their partners' weight statuses.

We predicted that women's own BMIs would predict their body ideals (what they would like to look like; Hypothesis 2) and body perception (what they think they currently look like; Hypothesis 5). Using APIMs, we found support for these hypotheses. Women who were relatively heavier perceived their bodies to be larger and also had

larger ideal bodies. Given the high rates of obesity in the US (Danaei et al., 2009) and the striking contrast of a thin beauty ideal that is almost inevitably impossible to achieve (Markey & Markey, 2005), these women's reports of their own body perceptions and ideals may reflect a realistic understanding of their weight status and what they could hope for in their weight status.

We also hypothesized that women's partners' BMIs would predict their body ideals (what they would like to ideally look like; Hypothesis 3) and body perceptions (what they think they currently look like; Hypothesis 6). We found that partners' BMIs did not predict women's perceptions of their ideal bodies, but did predict their perceptions of their current bodies. Specifically, after controlling for women's own weight, women in relationships with relatively thin partners tended to think their own bodies looked heavier than women in relationships with relatively heavy partners. Because we controlled for BMI in this analysis, this finding suggests that being in a relationship with a relatively thin partner, and presumably comparing oneself to this partner, leads women to report being heavier than they would if they were in a relationship with a relatively heavy partner. This finding provides support for the role of partner comparison processes in individuals' perceptions of their bodies and weight (Markey & Markey, 2013). Of course, it is also possible that women who report body dissatisfaction because they are heavier than their partners do so because they value thinness. This may have led them to choose a relatively slender partner and may contribute to their own body dissatisfaction.

Hypotheses 4 and 7 focused on the dissimilarity effects and were only partially supported. Contrary to Hypothesis 4, we did not find an interaction effect for women's perceptions of their ideal bodies. We had expected that partners' BMIs relative to women's own BMIs would predict their perceptions of body ideals, but this was not the case and this effect was also not moderated by sexual orientation indicating that this finding holds true for both lesbian and heterosexual women. However, consistent with Hypothesis 7, we found a significant dissimilarity effect for women's perceptions of their current bodies. Graphing out this effect (see Figure 2), it appears that if a woman was relatively heavy and her partner was relatively thin, she was likely to view herself as especially heavy. Women's partners' weight statuses are associated with how women view their own weight statuses. Again, this effect was not moderated by sexual orientation, indicating that this finding was similar for both lesbian and heterosexual women.

Consistent with past literature (e.g., Polemni et al., 2009) examining heterosexual and lesbian women's body image, we predicted that lesbian women would have larger body ideals than would heterosexual women (Hypothesis 1); this hypothesis was confirmed. Analyses further revealed that women's body perceptions (i.e., ratings of their own body size) were not significantly predicted by their sexual orientation. Lesbian women's preference for larger bodies may reflect beauty ideals in lesbian subculture including a greater focus on functionality and athleticism as contributors to attractiveness (Few, 2001; Hefernan, 1999). These ideals may also reflect lesbian women's rejection of the extremely thin and typically unhealthy, prepubescent beauty ideals endorsed by heterosexual culture. Thus, these body preferences may be more adaptive than those endorsed by heterosexual women.

Taken together, these findings suggest that although lesbian women may have relatively larger body ideals than do heterosexual women, their perceptions of their own

bodies are still related to their partners' weight statuses in a manner similar to heterosexual women. By examining women's ratings of their perceived current body and ideal body separately, we were able to build on past research that sometimes suggests that lesbian women are more satisfied with their bodies and/or report experiencing different standards of attractiveness than do heterosexual women (Few, 2001; Polemni, 2009). These findings also help to elucidate some of the conflicts in past research by providing an explanation as to how lesbian women may endorse larger body ideals and yet still experience body dissatisfaction; lesbian women's partners appear to be part of the equation.

Limitations and conclusions

In spite of the novel aspects of this research, such as the inclusion of both lesbian and heterosexual women and their partners, this study has some limitations worth noting. Specifically, this research is limited in its use of correlational and cross-sectional data. We build on past research (e.g., Davison, Markey, & Birch, 2000) suggesting that weight status predicts body image and not the reverse. Furthermore, we tested models where BMI is utilized as a predictor and body perceptions and ideals as the outcomes. However, it is not possible to conclusively determine from these data that this is the definitive direction of effects. This research would also be strengthened through the inclusion of various measures of body image and more explicit assessment of social comparison processes. In particular, the pictorial measure we used is an efficient assessment of body image, but lengthier assessment tools may provide more thorough assessments. Finally, although our sample was somewhat diverse, replications that include larger and more representative samples of heterosexual and lesbian couples would help substantiate our findings.

In spite of these limitations, this research contributes to our understanding of women's body image—specifically their perceptions of their current body and body ideals—in the context of their romantic relationships. Our findings reveal that women's body ideals are associated with their own but not their partners' weight statuses. However, women's perceptions of their own bodies are associated with their partners' weight statuses. These findings were true for both heterosexual and lesbian women, suggesting that all women are likely to perceive their own bodies as a reflection not only of who they are but also to a certain extent in comparison with their partners' bodies. These results further support our proposed “partner comparison effect” (Markey & Markey, 2013), which suggests that individuals consider not only their own qualities but also their partners' qualities in making evaluations of themselves. Indeed, it seems to be the interaction of properties of the self (e.g., weight status) and properties of the partner that lead to individuals' self-perceptions.

These findings build on research suggesting the importance of romantic relationships in understanding individuals' health (Markey, Markey, & Gray, 2007). Given the high rates of obesity, and because overweight status is a health issue with consequences ranging from type 2 diabetes to cardiovascular disease, this research may prove relevant to education and intervention efforts. We have long suggested that weight management may be more likely to succeed if education and intervention efforts were to take into account the proximal social relationships that contribute to adults' eating behaviors (e.g.,

Markey, Markey, & Birch, 2001). This research suggests that body image interventions may also be wise to consider individuals' romantic partners. Whereas partner comparisons may lead individuals to feel distraught about their current weight status, partner support, and communication about these issues may actually lead to improvements in body image and ultimately health.

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