

# A Comparison of Lesbians, Gay Men, and Heterosexuals on Weight and Restrained Eating

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*It is possible that lesbians are as concerned with weight and dieting as are heterosexual women in order to be socially accepted in our society, while men (both gay and heterosexual) have more flexibility in this regard. On the other hand, lesbians, like heterosexual men, may be less concerned with weight than are heterosexual woman and gay men, since the latter groups may strive to be desirable to men. To test these hypotheses, lesbians, gay men, and heterosexual women and men were compared on weight, dieting, preoccupation with weight, and exercise activity. Heterosexual women and gay men reported lower ideal weights and tended to be more preoccupied with their weights than were lesbians or heterosexual men. However, gender was a more salient factor than sexual orientation on most variables, with both lesbians and heterosexual women reporting greater concern with weight, more body dissatisfaction, and greater frequency of dieting than did gay or heterosexual men. The results indicate that both lesbians and heterosexual women are influenced by cultural pressures to be thin, but that these pressures may be greater for heterosexual women.*

Concerns about weight and dieting have reached epidemic proportions among women in Western societies, yet there has been little reasearch to date on body weight and dieting among lesbians (see also Striegel-Moore, Tucker, & Hsu, 1990). On the one hand, Dworkin (1988) has proposed that both lesbians and heterosexual women are socialized to consider their appearance a primary aspect of their lives and must adhere to traditional standards of beauty for social acceptance. Dworkin argues that fiction books for lesbians describe the heroine as slim, lesbians newspapers print diet ads, and lesbians who are considered fat undergo discrimination. Rothblum, Brand, Miller & Oetjen (1990) found a

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positive relationship between weight and incidence of employment discrimination, school victimization, and lower self-confidence. Although this study did not ask subjects to indicate their sexual orientation, it would seem that lesbians, like heterosexuals, need to be thin to be accepted by occupational and educational institutions.

On the other hand, Brown (1987) has indicated, based on clinical evidence and communication with researchers, that lesbians are in fact underrepresented among women with eating disorders. She provides a theoretical framework for lesbians' greater acceptance of their body weight. Brown draws a parallel between devaluation of weight in U.S. society (e.g., women must take up little space, be less visible, be feminine, nurture others rather than themselves, and suppress their power) and devaluation of lesbians (e.g., lesbians should be invisible, suppress their power, and not love other women). Brown further indicates that comfort with lesbianism is related to comfort with body size, and that lesbians who are closeted are more likely to be distressed with their weight. Lesbians are more likely to view discrimination against the obese as stigmatization and political oppression than are heterosexual women.

One purpose of the present study was to investigate weight, preoccupation with weight, dieting, and eating disorders among lesbians, and compare these variables with those of heterosexual women. We wanted to examine whether lesbians would be equally likely (as proposed by Dworkin) or less likely (as proposed by Brown) to be concerned with body weight.

There has been some research on body weight concerns among gay men. Silberstein, Mishkind, Striegel-Moore, Timko, & Rodin (1989) predicted that gay men placed more emphasis on men's physical attributes (e.g., body build, appearance, grooming) than did heterosexual men. Their results indicated that gay men were less satisfied with their upper body strength and physical condition than were heterosexual men, but that there were no difference on physical attractiveness or eating disorders.

There has been no research comparing lesbians with gay men or with heterosexuals on concerns with weight, and this was the second purpose of the present study. In view of the enormous concerns that women have about weight and dieting compared with men, we could argue that men (both gay and heterosexual) may have more flexibility in our society regarding their weight, and may not be victims of discrimination until they are considerably more obese than are women. This argument would predict a main effect for gender (but not sexual orientation) on weight and weight-related concerns.

However, one could speculate that compared with heterosexual women, lesbians would be *less* concerned about their body weight if body weight concerns are a reflection of a need to be desirable to men. In keeping with this reasoning, gay men, compared with heterosexual men, would be *more* likely to be weight conscious in order to be more physically attractive to other men. Some evidence supporting this contention comes from research on the content of personal ads placed by lesbians, gay men, heterosexual women, and heterosexual men (Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Laner, 1978; Laner & Kamel, 1978). Laner (1978) found that heterosexual women were over three times more likely to describe their own appearance (primarily weight, height, age, and hair and eye color) than were lesbians; heterosexual and gay men were twice as likely to describe their own appearance than were lesbians. Lesbians and heterosexual

women rarely stated a preference for the desired appearance of their partners, whereas heterosexual men and gay men were twice as likely as women to do so. Accordingly, this argument would lead to the prediction that there would be a gender by sexual orientation interaction, with heterosexual women and gay men most affected by weight concerns, compared with lesbians and heterosexual men.

## METHODS

### Subjects

The lesbian sample consisted of 124 women who attended a regional Southeastern women's music festival in 1987, a predominantly lesbian event, and who described themselves as lesbian (rather than heterosexual or bisexual). Questionnaires were distributed to all 250 participants at the festival, and were returned to a box marked for that purpose during the festival. The mean age of lesbian respondents was 33.3 years ( $SD = 6.64$ ).

The gay male sample consisted of 13 men who attended a regional Southeastern gay and lesbian conference in 1987, a predominantly gay male event, and who described themselves as gay (rather than heterosexual or bisexual). Questionnaires were distributed to all 200 participants at the conference, and were returned to a box marked for that purpose. The mean age of the gay male respondents was 34.6 years ( $SD = 7.52$ ).

The heterosexual sample consisted of 133 women and 39 men who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course and who volunteered to complete the questionnaires for extra course credit. There were about 350 students enrolled in the course. Mean age of the heterosexual female respondents was 18.9 years ( $SD = 2.53$ ) and of the heterosexual male respondents was 19.0 years ( $SD = 1.22$ ).

### Measures

A comprehensive questionnaire, the Weight and Exercise Survey, was developed for this study; it contained four components. The first part, *demographic information*, consisted of six items about subjects' gender, age, level of education, whether they were currently college undergraduates, sexual orientation (1 = exclusively heterosexual to 5 = exclusively gay/lesbian) and whether they currently were involved in a sexual relationship with a partner of at least 2 weeks duration.

The second component, *weight information*, included eight items. Subjects indicated their height, weight, and ideal weight (how much they would like to weigh). Then, on five-point scales, subjects indicated their degree of perceived overweight (1 = extremely underweight; 5 = extremely overweight), preoccupation with weight, and the degree to which a person's weight influenced the subject's sexual attraction to him/her. Finally, subjects were asked whether they had ever dieted to lose weight and whether they were currently dieting to lose weight.

The third component of the questionnaire consisted of three subscales of the

*Eating Disorder Inventory* (EDI; Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983). The EDI is a 64-item self-report scale designed to measure psychological characteristics common in anorexia and bulimia. Items are scored on six-point rating scales (1 = always; 6 = never). The Drive for Thinness subscale consists of seven items that assess "excessive concern with dieting, preoccupation with weight and entrenchment in an extreme pursuit of thinness" (Garner et al., 1983, p. 17). The Bulimia subscale consists of seven items about binge eating and vomiting. The Body Dissatisfaction subscale contains nine items assessing degree of dislike of personal body parts (e.g., stomach, thighs). The EDI has been found to be internally consistent and to differentiate women with anorexia from female college student controls (Garner et al., 1983). Furthermore, the three subscales used in the present study were found to discriminate women with bulimia from college student controls (Garner et al., 1983).

Finally, the fourth component of the questionnaire consisted of the *Obligatory Running Questionnaire* (Blumenthal, O'Toole, & Chang, 1984). This is a 21-item, true/false, self-report scale designed to measure compulsory participation in exercise. Blumenthal et al. found that 86% of male and female runners felt guilty if they did not exercise, and 72% felt irritable or depressed if they missed a workout.

## RESULTS

### Demographic Information

The age difference described earlier was significant,  $F(1,305) = 332.02, p < .0001$ . Consequently, analyses of covariance were performed on all subsequent variables with age as a covariate. On average, the lesbian sample had four-year college degrees and 12 (10%) were currently in college. All of the gay men had some college education and on average had four-year college degrees.

Measures of weight, eating disorders, and obligatory exercise were analyzed using separate 2 (gender) by 2 (sexual orientation) analyses of covariance.

### Weight Information

Weight and height reported by subjects were compared with weight and height norms on the Metropolitan Life Insurance Tables (1983), and a deviation score was calculated from the normative weight. Previous research (Rzewnicki & Forgays, 1987) indicates a close correlation between self-reported weight and actual weight. There was a near-significant main effect for sexual orientation,  $F(1,302) = 3.15, p < .08$ . Lesbians and gay men had higher self-reported weights and thus weights that deviated more from the life insurance norms than did heterosexual women and men.

There was a main effect for gender on degree of perceived overweight,  $F(1,303) = 16.18, p < .0001$ , with women more likely than men to perceive themselves as overweight. Next, each subject's reported ideal weight was subtracted from reported actual weight. There was a significant main effect for sexual orientation,  $F(1,301) = 4.73, p < .05$ . Lesbians and gay men deviated more from their own ideal weight than did heterosexuals. There was also a signifi-

cant main effect for gender,  $F(1,301) = 10.35, p < .001$ , with women deviating more from their ideal weight than did men.

Finally, we subtracted the life insurance normed weight for each subject from their self-reported ideal weight. There was a significant main effect for gender,  $F(1,303) = 26.11, p < .0001$ , with men more likely to report ideal weights that were closer to the normed weights than did women. There was a significant sexual orientation  $\times$  gender interaction,  $F(1,303) = 8.07, p < .005$ . Simple effects indicate that lesbians reported ideal weights that were closer to the life insurance charts than did heterosexual women, and gay men reported ideal weights that were closer to the charts than did heterosexual men. Heterosexual men reported weights that were *higher* than the normed weights on the life insurance charts.

The interaction between sexual orientation and gender approached significance on preoccupation with own weight,  $F(1,303) = 3.27, p < .07$ . Heterosexual women and gay men were the most preoccupied with their own weight, followed by lesbians, with heterosexual men the least preoccupied with their own weight.

There was a significant main effect for gender on the extent to which another person's weight influenced subjects' sexual attraction to her/him,  $F(1,302) = 5.41, p < .05$ . Men were more likely than were women to indicate that another person's weight would affect their sexual attractiveness to her/him. Subjects who reported that they currently had a sexual partner with whom they had been involved for at least 2 weeks did not differ in weight or percent overweight from subjects who did not have a sexual partner.

There was a significant main effect for gender on the percentage of subjects who had ever dieted to lose weight,  $F(1,303) = 36.28, p < .0001$ , with women more likely to have ever dieted than had men. There were no significant effects for the percentage of subjects who were currently dieting to lose weight.

### EDI

A significant main effect for gender was apparent on the Drive for Thinness subscale of the EDI,  $F(1,304) = 14.46, p < .0002$ , with women scoring higher than did men. Similarly, there was a significant main effect for gender on the Body Dissatisfaction subscale of the EDI,  $F(1,304) = 16.39, p < .0001$ , with women scoring higher than did men. There were no significant effects on the Bulimia subscale of the EDI.

### Obligatory Running Questionnaire

No significant effects or interactions appeared on the Obligatory Running Questionnaire.

## DISCUSSION

The most striking finding of this study was the salience of gender over sexual orientation in influencing weight and dieting. Not only were there more gender effects than effects for sexual orientation, but the gender effects tended

to be of greater magnitude. Weight was of greater concern for women than for men, regardless of sexual orientation. Women expressed more concern with dieting and greater dislike of their bodies than did men.

These results are consistent with those of Drewnowski and Yee (1987) who found that most college women wanted to lose weight but that most college men were evenly divided between those who wanted to lose and those who wanted to gain weight. Similarly, Silberstein, Striegel-Moore, Timko, & Rodin (1988) found that almost no women wanted to weigh more than they did, whereas men were equally likely to want to weigh more as less than they did.

The results provide some modest support for the hypothesis that heterosexual women and gay men are more affected by societal norms about weight than are lesbians and heterosexual men. Heterosexual women reported ideal weights that deviated more from the life insurance norms than did lesbians, indicating that the former group is striving for thinner bodies. There was also a tendency for heterosexual women and gay men to be more preoccupied with their weight than were lesbians and heterosexual men.

The present study also found that men, regardless of sexual orientation, were more likely to indicate that they would be more sexually attracted to other people based on their weight. It would seem consequently that heterosexual women and gay men would be most affected by this preference on the part of men, since these two groups are sexually involved with men. This finding is consistent with the research indicating that heterosexual women are most likely to describe their own appearance in personal ads, whereas lesbians are less likely to do so (Deaux & Hanna, 1984; Laner, 1978). Despite this reported preference on the part of men, however, subjects' weight did not affect whether or not they currently had a sexual partner.

The study also indicated a tendency for lesbians and gay men to weigh more than did heterosexuals, even when age was covaried. This would explain why there was a significant main effect for sexual orientation on the variables of ideal weight and deviation from ideal weight. However, lesbians and gay men did not differ from heterosexuals on degree of perceived overweight, indicating that the higher weight was not of great concern to them.

A weakness of this study is the small numbers of men, both gay and heterosexual, who responded to the survey, even though we had access to large numbers of men in both groups. However, the results of this study are in accord with those of Silberstein et al. (1989), who found that gay men are more dissatisfied with their bodies and appearance than are heterosexual men. The study did have adequate numbers of lesbians and heterosexual women. Finally, the male sample size, although small, was adequate to determine several interactions between gender and sexual orientation.

This study was conducted in 1987, before there were large numbers of men with acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) in the Southeastern United States. It is possible that as the number of people with AIDS, both gay and heterosexual, increases, our society will cease to equate slimness with health and instead may view extreme slimness as a possible symptom of disease.

The age difference between the heterosexual and the gay male and lesbian samples may indicate that the samples differed in other ways as well. Rothblum (1988) has described the difficulty in finding appropriate heterosexual

control groups for lesbian and gay male samples. Nevertheless, sexual orientation differences on weight and concern with weight appeared even with age as a covariate.

Interestingly, lesbian and gay political groups and the media have not focused to a great extent on the degree to which lesbians and gay men are weight and diet-conscious. Given the results of the present study, it seems that personal concern with weight as well as weight discrimination are issues that should be addressed in the lesbian and gay male community.

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