Perceptions of body image among working men and women

C Emslie, K Hunt, S Macintyre

The British Government has expressed concern about media images that equate female beauty with extreme thinness. In 2000 the Minister for Women, Tessa Jowell, held a series of meetings with representatives from modelling agencies and teenage magazines to discuss possible links between the use of thin models in the fashion industry, and mental health and eating disorders among girls and women.

Given that lay definitions of overweight may be different from medical definitions, it is important to explore whether people's perceptions of their weight differ from "objective" measurements such as body mass index (BMI). A concern with thinness is often seen as a woman only problem. Is this true?

Methods and Results

Postal questionnaires were sent to employees working full time within a British bank in clerical, supervisory and management jobs and to full time clerical, technical and academic employees in a British university. The response rate was 76% (n=3176) for the bank and 67% (n=1641) for the university. Respondents were asked to report their height and weight so that body mass index (kg/m²) could be calculated. They were also asked to indicate whether they thought they were "about the right weight", "too heavy" or "too light" for their height. Self esteem was measured using the Rosenberg self esteem scale. Pregnant women were excluded from the analyses. Full data were available for 1070 men and 995 women in the bank and 964 men and 571 women in the university. Further details are published elsewhere.

Table 1 Odds ratios for being overweight and for body image by gender, occupational grade and organisation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Bank OR 95% CI p Value</th>
<th>University OR 95% CI p Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overweight (body mass index (kg/m²) over 25)†‡</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.10 (0.04, 0.24) 0.22</td>
<td>0.10 (0.04, 0.24) 0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager/Senior academic†‡</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—Junior academic</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor/Technician</td>
<td>1.22 (0.83, 1.78) 0.31</td>
<td>1.32 (0.99, 1.78) 0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical/Clerical</td>
<td>1.14 (0.76, 1.70) 0.53</td>
<td>1.35 (0.92, 1.98) 0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body image (perceives “too heavy” for height)§§</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.10 (0.04, 0.24) 0.22</td>
<td>0.10 (0.04, 0.24) 0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>0.10 (0.04, 0.24) 0.22</td>
<td>0.10 (0.04, 0.24) 0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>10.03 (7.28, 13.82) 0.00</td>
<td>3.68 (2.48, 5.47) 0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager/Senior academic†‡</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—Junior academic</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor/Technician</td>
<td>0.87 (0.54, 1.42) 0.58</td>
<td>1.04 (0.69, 1.57) 0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical/Clerical</td>
<td>0.70 (0.42, 1.17) 0.17</td>
<td>0.55 (0.33, 0.95) 0.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Each factor controls for the other (that is, gender, for grade, and grade for gender), and for age.
†Bank n=2078, university n=1644. ‡The occupational grades in italics refer to the university.
§Each factor controls for the other (that is, gender, for grade, and grade for gender), and for age, body mass index and self esteem. *Bank n=2063, university n=1535.

Discussion

Among these respondents in full time work, women were significantly more likely than men to regard themselves as too heavy for their height. The magnitude of the gender difference is striking in both organisations. While gender differences have been found in other studies, they have not controlled for socioeconomic status. In contrast, our study compares men and women working full time in similar non-manual jobs within the same organisation.

As this study focused on non-manual employees, the results cannot be generalised to manual workers. We also used self reported measures of height and weight. There is some evidence that women under report their weight more than men. However, underestimating women's BMI is unlikely to explain the large gender differences in body image found in both organisations.

Our findings suggest that concern about women's perceptions of their body image is well founded. Health promotion messages that focus on the dangers of being overweight may be particularly counterproductive for women who are already an appropriate weight for their height.
We would like to thank the personnel departments in both organisations. This work would not have been possible without the participation of the bank and university employees who took the time and effort to complete the questionnaires. We would also like to thank Geoff Der for statistical advice and Lindsay Macaulay, Pat Fisher and Margaret Reilly for clerical assistance.

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