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Body Image

Focus Groups with Boys and Men

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In this exploratory study, boys and men (aged eight, thirteen, and sixteen years, and young adults) gave accounts of body shape ideals, body esteem, exercise, and diet in a series of focus groups. Men and boys in all groups presented discourses where being lean and muscular was linked to being healthy and fit. Being fat was related to weakness of will and lack of control by all age groups, and discourses of blame were used to describe those who were overweight. Sixteen-year-olds described peer pressure to be slender and muscular, and two young men had experienced teasing about their body size. Adult men and teenagers explicitly linked having a well-toned, muscular body with feelings of confidence and power in social situations. Data are discussed in relation to recent suggestions that Western cultural attitudes to the male body are in a state of change and that men are becoming more concerned with body image.

Key words: body esteem, men, boys, muscularity, health, exercise, social pressure

Men's health has attracted significant interest in the past decade (Lyons and Willott 1999). The recent development of new popular magazines such as *Men's Health* and the setting up of the Royal College of Nursing's Men's Health Forum in Britain in 1994 demonstrate the high level of interest. Although there is increasing interest in the encouragement of exercise and a healthy diet in men, relatively little is known about how men perceive their bodies (i.e., their body image) and the areas of the body that present particular satisfaction and dissatisfaction in men. Most research on body image has focused on women, largely because there is general agreement that social pressures on women to be a particular shape and size are more pronounced than pressures on men. Women encounter more prejudice when overweight and are more likely to diet, have plastic surgery, and have problematic relationships with food than men (Orbach 1993).

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The issue of men's body image is of particular interest at present because it has recently been suggested that British and American cultural attitudes toward the male body have been in a state of change since the mid-1980s (Pope et al. 1999) and that men are becoming more and more concerned with body image (Mishkind et al. 1986; Mort 1988). Mishkind et al. (1986) argued that there had been a cultural shift in the portrayal of men's bodies in the popular media in the 1980s when the male body was increasingly used in television advertisements in place of the more traditional image of the female body. They argued that men were under increasing pressure to conform to this cultural ideal of the lean, well-toned, muscular build, paralleled by an increasing preoccupation among men with weight and body image:

Advertisements celebrate the young, lean, muscular male body, and men's fashions have undergone significant changes in style both to accommodate and to accentuate changes in men's physiques toward a more muscular and trim body. (P. 545)

Pope et al. (1999) have also suggested (through an analysis of male action toys) that cultural ideals for the male body have become increasingly muscular over time, with many toys of the 1990s exceeding the muscularity of even the largest human bodybuilders. They argue that there has been a cultural shift in attitudes toward the male body during the past thirty years.

Increased cultural concern with the appearance of the body could affect men's health in a variety of ways. Concern may translate into increased exercise in individual men (to reshape and tone the body), which could have generally positive effects on cardiovascular fitness (British Heart Foundation 1993). Increased bodily concern could also lead to negative effects such as ingestion of physically damaging drugs such as anabolic steroids and human growth hormones (Epperley 1993). Dissatisfaction with the appearance of the body may also lead to negative mental health effects such as lowered self-esteem and self-worth (Furnham and Greaves 1994). Some authors have suggested that concern with being slender may even be a causal factor in the development of anorexia nervosa in men (Krasnow 1997). Clearly, work focusing on men's experiences of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their bodies, and its relation to health-related behaviors such as exercise and diet, is timely.

Quantitative studies measuring body satisfaction in men have suggested that a significant percentage of men may be dissatisfied with their body shape and size. Mishkind et al. (1986) found that when shown a set of silhouette drawings of male body types ranging from very thin to very fat, 75 percent of male students reported that their ideal was discrepant from their current body size. Roughly half wanted to be bigger than they were and half wanted to be thinner than they were. Cash (1990) set the percentage lower. In their readers of *Psychology Today* (an older sample), they found that 34 percent of men

were generally dissatisfied with their looks, 41 percent with their weight, 32 percent with muscle tone, 28 percent with upper torso, 50 percent with mid-torso, and 21 percent with lower torso. These percentages were higher than those found in a similar study in the 1970s (Berscheid, Walster, and Bornstedt 1973), which had found that only 15 percent of men reported general dissatisfaction with their looks, 35 percent with their weight, 25 percent with muscle tone, 18 percent with upper torso, 36 percent with mid-torso, and 12 percent with lower torso. The change between these two studies suggested that men in the 1980s may have been less satisfied than men in the 1970s. Furnham and Greaves (1994) administered the Franzoi and Shields Body Esteem Scale to forty-seven men aged eighteen to thirty-five years (mostly university undergraduates). Men were least satisfied with biceps, width of shoulders, and chest measurement and were most likely to try to change these aspects of the body. This finding coincides with current ideals of male body shape, where the emphasis is on broad shoulders and a well-muscled chest and arms.

One of the limitations of the questionnaire work cited above is that these estimates of dissatisfaction do not tell us why men are dissatisfied and how this dissatisfaction affects their behavior in relation to exercise and diet. The study that follows reports an exploratory study incorporating a series of focus groups with men and boys aged eight to twenty-five years. By asking these men to explain how they feel about their bodies, their body shape ideals, and the attempts that they make to change their body shape and weight through exercise and diet, we are attempting to explore how young men experience their bodies within a culture that is apparently placing more emphasis on the importance of body image for men.

We used a focus group methodology (rather than individual interviews) for a variety of reasons. First, we wanted to generate interactive data. Focus groups involve group discussions where participants focus collectively on a topic. As such, participants talk mostly to each other rather than to the researcher (unlike one-to-one interviews) and they tend to talk in a way that is more like normal speech, so focus groups are an ideal way to access "natural language" (Wilkinson 1998). Second, focus groups result in increased disclosure. Focus group research has shown that people are more likely to self-disclose and share personal experiences in group rather than one-to-one settings (Morgan and Krueger 1993), particularly when in the presence of others whom they perceive to be like themselves, because they can feel relatively empowered and supported in a group situation, surrounded by their peers (Farquhar and Das 1999). We had also found in pilot work that boys and men talked more freely in a group rather than individually. Focus groups are also particularly useful for investigating issues that are perceived to be sensitive by the group (Renzetti and Lee 1993). Pilot work showed that men felt that "body image" was a difficult topic to talk about, so we defined the topic as "sensitive" in this context. Body image (especially disclosure of

insecurities about the body) is a sensitive issue among many men, who may be inexperienced at discussing how they feel about the way that they look (see Grogan 1999). Also, as feminist women researchers, we wanted to use a method that was characterized by nonhierarchical relations between researchers and those researched (Wilkinson 1999). While focus groups do not eliminate the power differential (we supply the topics, start and stop the tape recorder, set the venue), we decided (following Wilkinson 1999) that focus group methodology would enable us to shift the balance of power away from the researcher and toward the research participants relative to one-to-one interviews. As focus groups are designed to provide opportunities for an interactive exchange of views, they are less amenable to the researcher's influence (Morgan 1988). We also hoped that research participants would feel better able to assert their own agendas in a group of their peers and to negotiate meanings through discussion (Kitzinger and Farquhar 1999). These advantages make the focus group methodology particularly well suited to our aim of understanding how men and boys construct body image.

We put a lot of thought into who should run the focus groups and ran pilot groups with male and female facilitators. Our reading had led us to expect that boys and men would be more comfortable disclosing information to women than to men (Spencer, Faulkner, and Keegan 1988). Discussions with men and boys in pilot work confirmed that males in the target age groups felt that it would be less threatening to have the groups facilitated by women (as outsiders to the group) rather than men. However, facilitators of each group were matched with the group in terms of regional accent, ethnicity, and social class (each interviewer was a former student at schools/colleges from where the men and boys were selected). We limited the size of our focus groups to four participants each to encourage discussion (focus groups usually have about six to eight participants) (Wilkinson 1998). Pilot work showed that men were reticent about talking about their bodies in larger (perceived to be more "impersonal") groups. We interviewed them in groups of boys aged eight, thirteen, sixteen, and adults because we wanted to investigate age-related effects. Although there is a notable lack of research on body satisfaction in young boys, there has been a lot of interest in body satisfaction in adolescence, particularly in the light of suggestions that anabolic steroid use may be on the increase in male adolescents (Rickert et al. 1992). Questionnaire studies suggest that adolescent boys may be less satisfied with their bodies than younger boys (Conner et al. 1996) but do not tell us why this may be or how this affects body image-relevant behaviors such as dieting and exercise. This exploratory study allows us to investigate the reasons for body dissatisfaction, body shape ideals, and behavioral concomitants of body image in a context that allows men and boys to provide full and detailed explanation to complement existing quantitative research.

METHOD

These focus groups were part of a larger study of men's and women's body image cited in Grogan (1999).

Participants

The participants were chosen on a volunteer basis; four eight-year-old and four thirteen-year-old boys from one state primary and one state secondary school in Sheffield; eight men aged sixteen years who were students at two sixth form colleges in Kent; and four men aged nineteen to twenty-five years who were students at Manchester Metropolitan University. All were of average build for their height (i.e., none were notably over- or underweight as judged by the researchers), were white, and were from working- and middle-class backgrounds.

Materials

A set of themes was produced to be used as an interview guide. These covered body image issues such as weight, appearance, and food and were derived from previous interview work with women (Grogan and Wainwright 1996) and from the existing literature on body image concerns in men. A cassette recorder with a directional microphone was used to record the interviews.

Procedure

There were five focus groups: one for each age with two separate groups of sixteen-year-olds. All participants completed research contracts prior to the study that outlined their right to withdraw from the study at any time and that outlined the extent of confidentiality of the data. Parental permission was also sought for the boys and adolescents. The focus groups took place in quiet rooms at school or college and were facilitated by some of the researchers (white women in their twenties). Participants were first engaged in semiformal chat to try to make them feel at ease. When they seemed relaxed, the cassette recorder was turned on and the focus group started. Discussion centered on body shape (current, current and projected future ideals, satisfaction, reference groups), weight (current, ideal, satisfaction, reference groups), and diet (current, ideal, beliefs about diet). Sessions lasted about thirty minutes and were closed when the conversation "dried up" naturally. Participants were assured of anonymity, and all gave permission for the conversation to be recorded prior to the focus group.

Results and Discussion

All speech (including that of the interviewer) was transcribed, and the interviewees' speech was submitted to a "thematic decomposition" (Stenner 1993). This is a close reading that separates the transcript into coherent stories or "themes." Particular attention was paid to similarities and differences in discourses presented by men of different ages. These will be addressed here under theme headings, with boys and men referenced by pseudonyms to preserve anonymity. The young adult men will be called Adam, Andy, Alan, and Alex. The sixteen- to seventeen-year-olds will be called Tom, Tony, Tim, Tobias, Peter, Paul, Patrick, and Perry. The adolescents will be called Simon, Shaun, Sandy, and Stan. The eight-year-olds will be called Ben, Brian, Bill, and Bernie.

The Importance of Being Muscular

Muscle tone and muscle mass were important to all these men, from age eight to twenty-five, supporting previous work that has explicitly linked the mesomorphic, muscular build with male physical attractiveness. Men in all focus groups presented similar ideals for the male body, which was toned, muscular, and "looked fit." For instance, in the adult group:

Adam: The shaped jaw and perfect pecs.

Andy: Defined stomach muscles.

Alan: Healthy and fit.

Andy: Toned definitely.

Adam: Height doesn't matter. If you are toned that'd be about as good as you can have.

Andy: As long as they look fit and toned and healthy and athletic.

In these descriptions, the ideal body was represented in terms of look and function. Being muscular ("defined stomach muscles," "perfect pecs") and toned was linked in these men's discourse with being physically fit ("fit . . . healthy and athletic"). Men and boys in all focus groups presented discourses where muscularity and fitness were intimately related. There are a number of possible explanations for this pattern. It may be a way that groups of men negotiate the discussion of a topic (the look of other men's bodies) that makes them feel uncomfortable. Discussion of other men's bodies is probably not something that they are accustomed to doing, and our pilot work showed that men find this a "sensitive" (Renzetti and Lee 1993) topic. One way of negotiating this is to change the topic into something that they are probably used to, and that is not a "sensitive" topic, such as physical fitness. Even the adolescents tended to relate body shape ideals to sports and fitness:

Interviewer: What is your ideal shape for a man, say when you are in your twenties?
 Simon: Muscular legs.
 Shaun: Muscular.
 Sandy: Good tan like.
 Stan: Like a footballer. Just medium build.
 Simon: Not fat, not right thin, just medium.
 Interviewer: So how would you like to develop?
 Sandy: Bodybuilder.
 Simon: Boxer.
 Shaun: Just a bit muscular.
 Stan: Yeah.
 Interviewer: Where would you like the muscles?
 All: On my arms.
 Stan: Chest.
 Sandy: Back, biceps, and triceps.
 Stan: All over.
 Shaun: I wouldn't want any of them ones like that though [illustrates large neck muscles with hands].

The ideal represented in all the focus groups was “just a bit muscular,” but not too muscular. Men and boys in all groups presented negative discourses of bodybuilding (which was seen as a unitary concept by all groups). Adult men represented bodybuilders as overly obsessed with their appearance, and men and boys in all age groups presented discourses of “fat and bodybuilding,” where they argued that the muscles would “turn to fat” as they aged. By allying bodybuilding with fatness, they justified their desire not to become too muscular. For instance, in the adolescent group:

Simon: [Bodybuilders] will get fat anyway cos when you get older all muscles turn to fat. . . . If you have too much muscle you're gonna be fat when you're older unless you can get rid of it.

The discourses of muscularity presented by these men were clearly complex. On one hand, men and boys said that they wanted to be muscular, supporting research suggesting that the male ideal is young, lean, and muscular and that muscularity is central to male physical attractiveness and to traditional concepts of what it means to be masculine (Mansfield and McGinn 1993; Bordo 1993). However, there were clear boundaries on the degree of muscularity that these groups of men and boys perceived as acceptable, and the high levels of muscularity that were associated with bodybuilders were described by each group as being too muscular. This balance between acceptable and nonacceptable degrees of muscularity was negotiated by each group of boys and men. Each group started by describing muscularity as an ideal and then modified that to exclude extreme muscularity (because it was aesthetically displeasing, because it demonstrated unacceptable “obsession”

with the body because of the time put in to achieve it, and because it would lead to becoming fat). Muscularity was acceptable within certain clearly defined boundaries signifying masculinity (where it was linked to fitness and athleticism). When it was linked to narcissism (which has traditionally been conceptualized as female appropriate when applied to the body) (Grogan 1999) and when it was linked with becoming fat (signifying being out of control of the body) (Bordo 1993), it was unacceptable.

Fear of Fat

All groups presented negative discourses of overweight, where overweight people were blamed for becoming overweight and where teasing was represented as a legitimate response to those who did not fit the slender ideal. Becoming fat was linked with losing control of the body and with weakness of will, supporting previous work that has suggested that overweight is associated with self-indulgence and lack of self-discipline in cultures where overweight is stigmatized (Tiggemann and Rothblum 1988).

Tony: If you've got someone in your family who's quite fat, you see how they are and you think to yourself, I don't want to be like that. . . . It's a bit of a turnoff if you're fat, so you try not to get like that.

All groups presented discourses of blame and ridicule for fatness. For instance, in the sixteen-year-olds:

Tom: The fat thing, it's a point of ridicule. If you think you are fat, you are sort of opening yourself up to it. Having comments made about you.

Boys and men in all groups represented "getting fat" as something that was within their control. This discourse functioned to legitimate teasing and other social disapproval for fatness. There was no focus group in which men and boys questioned the fairness of teasing those who were overweight. Even those who had been teased because of perceived overweight did not question the legitimacy of other people's responses to their body size. For instance, two of the sixteen-year-olds felt fat (although they were within the normal weight range) and explained how they laughed about excess weight as a way of covering up their embarrassment about feeling fat:

Tobias: Well, I wouldn't mind being a bit slimmer I suppose but.

Tom: Me neither.

Tobias: Most of us are like fat [laughs] and we have competitions to see who has got the biggest belly [laughs].

Interviewer: What is this competition?

Tom: I don't know. It's a way of hiding.

Tobias: It's hiding that we're bothered really. I suppose in ourselves we are bothered. If our lifestyles lead us to getting fat we hide it by pretending we like it.

Both these young men had been bullied and teased about their bodies. Even so, they took responsibility for the teasing themselves ("if our lifestyles lead us to getting fat") and did not challenge the legitimacy of the teasing. Even among boys who had been teased about their weight, being fat was linked with weakness of will and lack of control. By using humor, these boys and men could avoid being positioned as inappropriately narcissistic (and feminine) in their concern about their bodies while expressing their distress at feeling overweight and at being ridiculed by their peers.

Exercise ("Being Bothered" vs. "Not Being Bothered")

Men in all age groups presented discourses of using exercise as an explicit way of avoiding getting fat (rather than for general fitness). For instance, the eight-year-olds reported that they all exercised to some extent and saw it as a way to avoid getting fat (rather than to get fit and/or healthy):

Interviewer: So do you exercise?
 Ben: Erm, sometimes.
 Bill: A bit.
 Bernie: I always do it.
 Interviewer: What sort of exercise do you do?
 Bill: I do press-ups.
 Ben: Running, biking.
 Interviewer: So do you think it is important to exercise then?
 Ben: Yeah.
 Bernie: It burns all your fat off.

Exercising to avoid getting fat (rather than dieting) may be a male-appropriate discourse (Mansfield and McGinn 1993), although most estimates suggest that relatively few British men and boys engage in regular exercise, especially in older age groups (Cox, Huppert, and Whichelow 1993; Turtle, Jones, and Hickman 1997). Dieting is generally perceived as a feminine behavior, and men tend not to report dieting as a means to lose weight (Brownmiller 1984). However, there was clearly a tension between "being bothered" to exercise to avoid getting fat and the dominant masculine discourse of "not being bothered" about looking muscular and slender (Aoki 1996). For instance, men in the adult group and the sixteen-year-old group emphasized that although they would exercise to avoid getting fat, they would not put any significant energy into exercising to try to change their body shape and size to emulate ideals such as the Chippendales or other muscular men. For instance, in the adult group:

Interviewer: Do you ever look in magazines and wish you could look like the models inside?

Adam: The thing is, most people could. Any of us could look like that if we put the effort and time in.

Andy: Go down to the gym and sort it out. If we were that bothered we would.

Adam: I think we can't be that bothered about it though, otherwise we'd do something about it. . . . At the end of the day, it's just me being lazy. I can't be bothered. A lot of girls go to aerobics and the gym but a lot of blokes can't be bothered.

Men in the sixteen-year-old group also presented the "not being bothered" discourse, where they indicated that they were only willing to put limited resources into trying to attain their ideal body shape:

Tobias: It would be nice to look rather large, but I'm not really bothered if I don't look that big.

Peter: I wouldn't mind looking like that [the Chippendales dance troupe]. But I wouldn't put myself out to look like it, you know.

This is not surprising, since bodily concern is a stereotypically feminine concern and runs contrary to prevailing ideals of masculinity where body function (rather than aesthetics) is valued (Aoki 1996). The men we interviewed used discourses that positioned them as having more important things to do than worry about their body image. Body image was constructed as too trivial to lead to changes in behavior ("we can't be that bothered about it though"), and putting time and energy into exercising to change body image was represented as female-appropriate behavior ("a lot of girls go to aerobics and to the gym"). The "can't be bothered" discourse that came out of these interviews is an explicit rejection of trying too hard to look good. Antonia Lyons and Sara Willott (1999) have shown that popular media tend to exert pressure on men not to be seen to be "trying too hard" to look after their health (which is represented as women's work and therefore linked with femininity). This may relate to a broader cultural tendency to position men as physically invulnerable and unconcerned about their health. In popular culture, men are often represented as intrepid explorers and invulnerable heroes (Harris 1995) and, above all, as healthy (Blaxter 1990). Men who use discourses of responsibility for the look and health of their bodies may run the risk of appearing unmasculine. Only the fear of fat legitimated putting energy into exercise. Improving the look of the body (by making it more muscular) was represented as a trivial (and feminine) concern.

Social Pressure

Participants in the sixteen-year-old group described peer pressure for them to be slender and muscular. Part of this discourse was implicit and

explicit competition with peers and the desire to match or “fit in” with groups of friends in terms of size:

Tobias: Yeah, I need to be a bit bigger because my brothers are like six foot and I’m a couple of inches shorter than all my friends as well and I feel pressure.

Tom: If you’ve got friends who are like quite big in build you want to be the same as them. Although you might not be able to do anything about it, it’s on your conscience all the time. You want to be that sort of size.

This discourse may function to legitimate body concern (because other young men are also concerned) and to relate it to male-appropriate discourses of competition between men, which Juanne Clarke and Julie Robinson (1999) identify as a classic “machismo” discourse. This also helps to resist being positioned as feminine, which may result from showing concern about the “look” of the body (Aoki 1996). This discourse was only seen in the sixteen-year-old focus groups and was seen in both groups.

Power and Self-Confidence

All groups presented “power and self-confidence” discourses, where self-esteem was related to how good they felt about their bodies. Adult men presented a discourse where they linked looking good (having a well-toned, muscular body) with feelings of confidence and power in social situations.

Interviewer: Do your feelings about your body affect your self-esteem?

Adam: Yeah, definitely. If you feel you look really shit, then you feel really shit. . . . If you’re among strangers and you look good it makes you feel more confident.

Adolescents also presented a discourse where they linked happiness and self-confidence with body image:

Interviewer: So if you had this ideal body shape, do you think you would be happier?

Simon: Yeah, cos if you were fat you’d be looking at yourself thinking you’re right ugly.

Sandy: And if you’re hanging around with a mate who is right muscular and stuff and he’s got a right good body shape all women are hanging round him, that would depress you a bit that would.

Discourses linking confidence and body image were frequently presented during the focus groups. Confidence and power in social situations were clearly related to the look of the body more than the function (being healthy, being athletic). These discourses suggest a concern for body image that goes beyond a socially acceptable male concern to be fit and healthy, and that implicates concern with aesthetics as well.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

These men and boys presented complex stories where they described pressure to look lean and muscular but felt that trying to get closer to their ideal through exercise was too trivial to justify the time and effort involved. Exercising to improve body image was considered feminine-appropriate behavior unless they were exercising to avoid getting fat. They were fearful of becoming fat for social (rather than health) reasons, and they blamed those who became fat because of perceived lack of willpower (to exercise and not eat too much). Although the lean, muscular look was associated in men's discourse with health and fitness, their given reasons for wanting to attain this look were primarily cosmetic (relating to social acceptance). Men and boys in all groups resisted representing men's bodies (including their own) as objects of aesthetic interest by discussing how bodies looked in relation to function (athletic, fit) and by stressing the trivial nature of concerns to look slender and muscular for its own sake, although they were clearly concerned that their bodies looked socially acceptably slender and muscular and reported that a positive body image would make them more confident/happy.

These findings conflict with previous work suggesting that men's body image is governed by concerns about function rather than aesthetics (e.g., Ogden 1993). These men were concerned about function and aesthetics. The social changes reported by Pope et al. (1999), where the aesthetics of the male body are emphasized, have clearly affected these young men's lives.

Obviously this is an exploratory study, with all the attendant requirements for care in interpreting the results. The findings necessarily require replication with other groups of men, including men from a wider range of social and ethnic groups. However, we have found the focus group methodology helpful in allowing us to gain a picture of men's natural speech when talking about their bodies. We found the technique useful in eliciting discourses of feelings, responses, and experiences of body image. Clearly such a situation can never be truly naturalistic, and we do not assume that these men would have spontaneously talked about body image had we not instigated the sessions. It is also possible that quite different conversations would have taken place had a male facilitator been present. Arguably, discussions with a male facilitator may represent more natural conversations that groups of men have around body image. However, pilot work suggested that men and boys were more reticent about discussing the topic with a male facilitator (focus groups were much shorter). With female facilitators, we feel that we have tapped into some of the ways that men may talk about their bodies and that this method has helped us to explore an area where we are necessarily outsiders.

The men and boys who took part in our focus groups presented discourses where aesthetics as well as function were forefronted. These findings challenge traditional concepts of men's body image being primarily linked to

function (although men may find it difficult to talk about their bodies as objects of aesthetic interest), suggesting that groups of men negotiate body image in complex and unpredictable ways.

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