

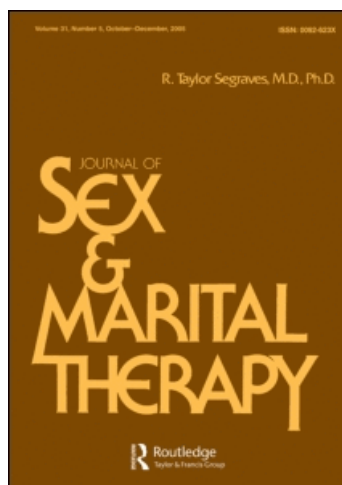
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### Weight Stigma in Existing Romantic Relationships

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## **Weight Stigma in Existing Romantic Relationships**

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*Associations between body mass index (BMI; kg/m<sup>2</sup>) and relationship quality and other partner/relationship perceptions were investigated in 57 dating or married couples. Heavier women had lower quality relationships, which they predicted were more likely to end. They partnered with less desirable men and thought their partners would rate them as less warm/trustworthy. Heavier women were judged by their male partners as lower in attractiveness/vitality and as poorer matches to their partners' attractiveness ideals. In contrast, men's BMI was generally not associated with relationship functioning. These findings point to the potential mechanisms that may contribute to heavier women's relationship difficulties.*

Prejudice and discrimination are commonly directed at overweight and obese individuals (Puhl & Brownell, 2001; Puhl & Latner, 2007). Intimate relationships are a common context for weight bias. College students rate heavy women as relatively unattractive, unlikely to be dating, unlikely to have a boyfriend or partner, sexually unskilled, and unworthy of attractive partners (Harris, 1990; Horsburgh-McLeod, Latner, & O'Brien, 2008; Regan, 1996; Tiggemann & Rothblum, 1988). Female adolescents and young adults who were overweight (or considered themselves overweight) reported that their weight interfered with social activities such as initiating dating and being considered attractive (Tiggeman & Rothblum, 1988) and that peers viewed them as unable to find a boyfriend (Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Faibisch, 1998). Compared to average-weight peers, overweight adolescents were less likely to have dated and were more dissatisfied with their dating

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status (Pearce, Boergers, & Prinstein, 2002). In prospective research, young overweight women were 20% less likely, and overweight men were 11% less likely, to be married 7 years later (Gortmaker, Must, Perrin, Sobol, & Dietz, 1993).

Although these findings suggest that overweight women experience difficulties in initiating lasting partnerships, literature examining associations between women's body mass index (BMI;  $\text{kg}/\text{m}^2$ ) and the quality of established romantic relationships is sparse and characterized by inconsistent findings. Markey, Markey, and Birch (2001) found that higher BMI in women was associated with lower self-rated marital quality, and Sheets and Ajmere (2005) found a tendency for higher BMI in women to be associated with lower relationship satisfaction. However, among 3000 individuals, BMI and relationship quality were not significantly correlated (Carr & Friedman, 2006). Another study found that obese women were happier with their marriages, although in this study the correlation between relationship quality and BMI was nonsignificant (Sobal, Rauschenbach, & Frongillo, 1995). None of these studies looked at associations between individuals' BMIs and their partners' perceptions of relationship quality. However, Markey, Markey, and Birch (2004) found greater differences between men's ratings of ideal-partner figure silhouettes and their ratings of their actual partners' silhouettes when the men's female partners had higher BMIs. Among overweight or obese women, 47% reported stigmatization by their spouse (Puhl & Brownell, 2006).

Relationship happiness and longevity is significantly predicted by partner judgments of each other (Boyes & Fletcher, 2007; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a, 1996b), especially in three critical domains: warmth/trustworthiness, attractiveness/vitality, and status/resources (Fletcher & Simpson, 2000). These domains have particular evolutionary significance: they signal that a potential mate will provide good genes and make a good co-parent (Fletcher & Simpson, 2000). People's ratings of their partners and of how closely their partners match their ideal partners in these domains predict perceivers' and targets' perceptions of relationship quality both cross-sectionally and longitudinally (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000a).

The present study examined weight-related stigma in intimate partnerships by investigating associations between women's weight, mate value, and other relationship perceptions, in male-female couples. First, we predicted that women of heavier weight would report lower relationship quality and would have less confidence about their relationships remaining intact. Importantly, we examined relationship quality from the perspective of both partners, a novel feature of this study. Second, we predicted that heavier women would be less valued by their male partners: that their partners would rate them as having lower mate value and as being poorer matches to their ideal partners. Unlike prior research, we measured partner judgments in the three domains that are most important in mate evaluation (warmth/trustworthiness,

attractiveness/vitality, and status/resources; Fletcher & Simpson, 2000). Third, we predicted that heavier women would report less positive “reflected appraisals,” that is, they would expect their partners to rate them as having lower mate value and would expect their partners to view them as poorer matches to the partners’ ideals in the three most important domains of mate evaluation. Fourth, we predicted that heavier women would pair with men with lower mate value. We also examined the above research questions in relation to men’s weight.

## METHOD

### Participants and Procedure

Participants were 57 male-female couples at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand (49.1% were dating, 50.9% were co-habiting or married; relationship length  $M = 27.26$  months,  $SD = 45.80$ ). Of the female participants, 3.5% were underweight (BMI < 18.5), 73.7% were normal weight (BMI = 18.5 to 24.9), 15.8% were overweight (BMI = 25 to 29.9), and 7% were obese (BMI  $\geq 30$ ). Of the male participants, 45.6% were normal weight, 49.1% were overweight, and 5.3% were obese. The sample was 81.6% Caucasian, 7.0% Maori, 3.5% Asian, and 7.9% unspecified ethnicity. Written consent was obtained prior to participation, and each person was paid NZ\$20. Men and women completed the questionnaires in separate rooms, and height and weight were measured by the investigator at the end of the study. The study was approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee.

### Measures

Relationship quality was measured using the Perceived Relationship Quality Component Scale (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000b). This scale measures satisfaction, commitment, closeness, trust, passion, and love (e.g., How satisfied are you with the relationship? 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). All items were then averaged, with higher scores representing more positive perceptions of relationship quality.

Predictions about relationship stability were measured using the Relationship Dissolution Predictions Scale (Boyes & Fletcher, 2007). Participants were asked to rate how likely it was that they would end the relationship with their partner in the next 3 months, 12 months, and 5 years, and were separately asked how likely it was that their partner would end the relationship across the same time frames. For each of the six items, participants wrote a percentage in the space provided. Ratings were averaged to provide one score for individuals’ perceived likelihood of ending the relationship themselves and another score for their perceived likelihood of their partner ending the relationship.

The five remaining measures were all constructed using the short forms of the Partner Ideals Scales (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). These scales involve participants rating 17 items, which load on the three factors representing the domains most central to mate evaluation processes: warmth/trustworthiness (understanding, supportive, kind, good listener, sensitive, and considerate), attractiveness/vitality (sexy, nice body, attractive appearance, good lover, outgoing, and adventurous), and status/resources (successful, nice house, financially secure, dresses well, and good job; Fletcher et al., 1999). In this study and in previous research using college-age samples, the phrase *potential to achieve* was added to the items from the status/resources scale. In the present study, these same 17 partner characteristics were used to create six scales. This methodology has produced valid and reliable results in prior research (e.g., Boyes & Fletcher, 2007; Campbell et al., 2001; Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006). To measure *Self-Perceived Mate Value*, participants were asked to rate each attribute in terms of how accurately it described themselves (1 = *very inaccurate*, 7 = *very accurate*). To measure *Perceptions of Partner's Mate Value*, participants were asked to rate each attribute in terms of how accurately it described their partner (1 = *very inaccurate*, 7 = *very accurate*). To measure *Ideal Standards*, participants were asked to rate each attribute in terms of how important it was in describing their ideal partner in a close relationship (dating, living together, or married; 1 = *very unimportant*, 7 = *very important*). To measure *Ideal-Perception Consistency*, for each of the 17 items, participants were asked to rate the extent to which each attribute in their current partner met their expectations relative to their ideal partner (1 = *poor match to my ideal*, 7 = *completely matches my ideal*). Participants also completed a scale indexing their own perceived match to their partners' ideals (1 = *poor match to my partner's ideal*, 7 = *completely match my partner's ideal*). Finally, to measure *Reflected Appraisals*, participants rated how they thought they were perceived by their partners (1 = *partner does not believe about me*, 7 = *partner strongly believes about me*). In all cases, mean scores were calculated for each dimension (warmth/trustworthiness, attractiveness/vitality, and status/resources). In addition to examining mean scores for each dimension, in each of our analyses we also separately examined the two scale items that are most relevant to physical attractiveness (nice body and attractive appearance).

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics. Table 2 shows all the correlations between BMI and our major variables (with relationship length controlled). The correlations most relevant to our hypotheses are presented below.

**TABLE 1.** Means, Standard Deviations, and Internal Consistency for Major Variables and Correlations Across Partners (N = 57 Couples)

	Women			Men			<i>R</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$	
Age (years, range 17–57)	23.37	7.10	—	24.82	7.34	—	.85**
BMI (kg/m <sup>2</sup> )	23.70	4.49	—	25.26	3.46	—	.45**
Perceived relationship quality	6.02	0.65	.92	5.73	0.73	.90	.41**
Likelihood of self ending the relationship with partner							
3 months	6.94	12.14	—	10.88	21.03	—	.39**
12 months	18.35	24.05	—	18.96	27.67	—	.61**
5 years	29.12	30.26	—	28.61	34.30	—	.53**
Likelihood of partner ending the relationship with self							
3 months	8.68	14.24	—	11.07	22.44	—	.35**
12 months	20.11	24.69	—	17.21	24.76	—	.68**
5 years	28.89	29.89	—	26.88	31.07	—	.78**
Self-perceived mate value							
Attractiveness/vitality scale	4.15	0.64	.66	4.14	0.71	.71	.07
Warmth/trustworthiness scale	5.15	0.53	.81	5.45	0.80	.81	.66**
Status/resources scale	5.30	0.98	.79	5.06	1.32	.91	.00
Reflected appraisals							
Attractiveness/vitality scale	5.48	0.76	.69	5.46	0.69	.71	.21
Warmth/trustworthiness scale	5.58	0.87	.86	5.24	1.03	.90	.11
Status/resources scale	5.52	0.98	.82	5.16	1.20	.88	–.03
Partner perceptions							
Attractiveness/vitality scale	4.77	0.74	.72	4.70	0.60	.75	–.08
Warmth/trustworthiness scale	5.77	0.87	.78	5.85	0.85	.81	.09
Status/resources scale	5.63	1.17	.89	5.70	0.89	.86	.02
Perceived match of current partner to ideal partner							
Attractiveness/vitality scale	5.80	0.89	.81	5.80	0.75	.81	.10
Warmth/trustworthiness scale	5.89	1.00	.91	5.92	0.78	.91	.14
Status/resources scale	5.61	1.20	.90	5.86	0.98	.90	–.10
Ideal standards for a partner							
Attractiveness/vitality scale	5.29	0.76	.72	5.53	0.66	.75	.01
Warmth/trustworthiness scale	6.39	0.56	.78	6.01	0.61	.81	.04
Status/resources scale	5.32	1.07	.89	4.60	1.23	.86	.17
Perceived match of self to partner's ideal partner							
Attractiveness/vitality scale	4.85	1.04	.83	5.21	0.91	.86	.03
Warmth/trustworthiness scale	5.18	1.20	.92	5.18	1.17	.92	.09
Status/resources scale	5.25	1.10	.89	5.08	1.12	.88	.03

Note: Correlations control for relationship length.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

## Female BMI and Relationship Quality

As predicted, women with higher BMIs reported lower relationship quality ( $r = -.29$ ,  $p < .05$ ). For male-rated relationship quality the association with female BMI was  $r = -.23$ ,  $p = .09$ . Heavier women expected that their partners were more likely to end their relationship ( $r = .30$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and the

**TABLE 2.** Within Participant and Across Partner Correlations between BMI and Other Variables (N = 57 Couples)

	Female BMI		Male BMI	
	Within-participant correlations	Across-partner correlations	Within-participant correlations	Across-partner correlations
Perceived relationship quality	-.29*	-.23 <sup>†</sup>	.01	.04
Likelihood of self ending the relationship with partner	.24 <sup>†</sup>	.21	-.05	-.12
Likelihood of partner ending the relationship with self	.30*	.28*	.00	-.09
Self-perceived mate value				
Attractiveness/vitality scale	-.19	-.45**	-.29*	-.11
Warmth/trustworthiness scale	-.04	-.19	-.20	-.20
Status/resources scale	-.13	-.42**	-.08	-.04
Nice body item	-.09	-.27*	-.27*	-.20
Attractive appearance item	-.11	-.29*	-.18	-.06
Reflected appraisals				
Attractiveness/vitality scale	-.01	-.26*	-.10	-.06
Warmth/trustworthiness scale	-.30*	-.25 <sup>†</sup>	-.27*	-.18
Status/resources scale	.02	-.28*	.03	-.08
Nice body item	-.33*	-.22	.07	-.22
Attractive appearance item	-.12	-.15	.04	-.28*
Partner perceptions				
Attractiveness/vitality scale	-.28*	-.08	.17	-.15
Warmth/trustworthiness scale	-.16	-.15	-.14	-.19
Status/resources scale	-.24 <sup>†</sup>	-.14	-.01	.11
Nice body item	-.09	-.53**	.10	-.20
Attractive appearance item	-.11	-.21	.01	-.06
Perceived match of current partner to ideal partner				
Attractiveness/vitality scale	-.09	-.27*	.09	.04
Warmth/trustworthiness scale	-.10	-.18	-.05	-.03
Status/resources scale	-.20	-.06	.08	.08
Nice body item	.03	-.56**	-.04	-.02
Attractive appearance item	-.01	-.31*	.14	-.02
Ideal standards for a partner				
Attractiveness/vitality scale	-.04	-.35**	-.30*	.02
Warmth/trustworthiness scale	-.20	-.08	-.18	-.17
Status/resources scale	-.11	-.25 <sup>†</sup>	-.05	-.14
Nice body item	-.14	-.45**	-.31*	-.12
Attractive appearance item	-.10	-.23 <sup>†</sup>	.01	-.03
Perceived match of self to partner's ideal partner				
Attractiveness/vitality scale	-.24 <sup>†</sup>	-.33*	-.19	-.09
Warmth/trustworthiness scale	-.37**	-.15	-.21	-.05
Status/resources scale	-.24 <sup>†</sup>	-.12	.05	-.05
Nice body item	-.28*	-.23 <sup>†</sup>	-.14	-.03
Attractive appearance item	-.29*	-.14	.01	-.18

*Note:* Within-participant correlations are between individuals' own BMI and ratings made by those individuals. Across-partner correlations are between individuals' own BMI and ratings made by partners. That is, whether a correlation is within participants or across partners is based on which partner is making the judgment, not which partner is the target of the judgment. For example, the correlation between women's BMI and women's perceptions of how well their male partners match their partner ideals is a within-participant correlation. All correlations control for relationship length.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; <sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ .

male partners of heavier women saw the women as more likely to end to relationship ( $r = .28, p < .05$ ).

### Female BMI and Males' Perceptions of Their Female Partners

Our second set of hypotheses concerned male partners' perceptions of heavier women. Against predictions, at the subscale level, there were no associations between women's BMI and men's partner perceptions. However, for ratings of "nice body," men perceived heavier women much less positively ( $r = -.53, p < .01$ ). Moreover, men's ratings of their partner on "nice body" were strongly associated with men's relationship quality ratings ( $r = .59, p < .01$ ).

### Female BMI and Males' Perceptions of How Well They Their Current Partners Matched Their Ideal Partners

Consistent with predictions, men rated heavier women as poorer matches to their ideal partner in the domain of attractiveness/vitality ( $r = -.27, p < .05$ ), including rating heavier female partners as poorer matches to their ideal partner for "nice body" ( $r = -.56, p < .01$ ) and attractive "appearance" ( $r = -.31, p < .05$ ).

### Female BMI and Females' Reflected Appraisals

Heavier women thought that their male partners saw them as less warm/trustworthy ( $r = -.30, p < .05$ ) but not as having less potential to achieve status/resources or being less attractive/vital overall (although heavier women expected that their male partners would rate them lower on the item "nice body" ( $r = -.33, p < .05$ ), which mirrored the findings for men's actual perceptions).

### Female BMI and Females' Perceptions of How Well They Matched Their Partners' Ideals

Heavier women perceived that they were viewed by their male partners as being a poorer match to the males' ideal partners for warmth/trustworthiness ( $r = -.37, p < .01$ ). The results were not significant for attractiveness/vitality ( $r = -.24, p = .08$ ) or status/resources ( $r = -.24, p = .08$ ) but revealed a similar pattern. Heavier women also thought that their partners would rate them as being a poorer match to the males' ideal partner for "nice body" ( $r = -.28, p < .05$ ) and "attractive appearance" ( $r = -.29, p < .05$ ).



## Female BMI and Male Partners' Mate Value

Our fourth hypothesis was that heavier women would pair with less desirable men. Women with higher BMIs paired with men with lower self-perceived mate value in the domains of attractiveness/vitality ( $r = -.45$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and status resources ( $r = -.42$ ,  $p < .01$ ), but not warmth/trustworthiness ( $r = -.19$ , *ns*); and viewed their partners' attractiveness-vitality less positively ( $r = -.28$ ,  $p < .05$ ; status-resources  $r = -.24$ ,  $p = .07$ , warmth/trustworthiness  $r = -.16$ , *ns*).

## Female BMI and Partner Ideals

Despite the lower mate value of heavier women's partners, heavier women did not have lower ideal standards for their relationships, in any domain. The male partners of heavier women had lower ideal standards for partners attractiveness/vitality overall ( $r = -.35$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and for partners having a nice body ( $r = -.45$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

## Associations with Male BMI

Finally, we also examined the same research questions in relation to men's weight. The findings were generally nonsignificant, with the exception that men with higher BMIs thought their partners were likely to rate them lower on warmth/trustworthiness ( $r = -.27$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study strengthen the argument that women's weight and romantic relationship functioning are linked. The results are novel in that they include male partners' relationship perceptions, show that heavier women's relationship insecurities are not entirely "in their heads," and shed light on the possible mechanisms that might account for the higher female BMI/lower relationship quality link.

Heavier women judged themselves as poorer matches to what they perceived their partners wanted in ideal mates. The results were significant or approached (but did not reach) significance for all three critical domains of mate evaluation and were significant for the two most weight-relevant scale items—"nice body" and "attractive appearance." These results are consistent with prior findings showing that many overweight women exhibit internalized weight bias, e.g., overweight women strongly endorse questionnaire items such as "I am less attractive than most other people because of my weight" and "Because of my weight, I don't understand how anyone attractive would want to date me" (Durso & Latner, *in press*).

Results from the reflected appraisals measure showed that heavier women perceived that their partners would judge them as less warm and trustworthy. This finding is significant in that warmth/trustworthiness is the most important category of mate evaluations (as shown in Campbell et al. [2001], Fletcher et al. [1999], and in our participants' ideal partner ratings). Also, prior research has shown that overweight women tend to be judged as less warm generally (Regan, 1996) suggesting that women's reflected appraisals in this domain might be based on their having experienced this bias previously. Curiously, there was no association between women's BMI and their reflected appraisals for the overall category of attractiveness/vitality, but there was for the key "nice body" item.

Extensive research (Murray, 2005) on the dependency regulation model has demonstrated how these types of relationship-related doubts can have an effect on relationship functioning. When people have less confidence in their partners' regard, they tend to hold back from fully committing to their relationships. Moreover, when people doubt their partners' regard, they lose the opportunity to experience the increases in self-esteem which typically occur in well-functioning relationships as a result of individuals being perceived in a highly positive fashion by partners.

The tendency for men to view heavier partners less positively than lighter partners was most clearly evident from men's ratings of how well their current partners matched their ideal partners. The male partners of heavier women rated the women as poorer matches to their ideal partners for attractiveness/vitality overall, and specifically for how well their current partners matched their ideals of "nice body" and "attractive appearance." The results for our direct measure of partner perceptions were less compelling. There was a strong association between women's weight and their partners' judgments of whether the women had a "nice body" but no other significant findings. To emphasize the importance of ratings of "nice body" to men, men's ratings on this single item were strongly correlated with the men's overall perceptions of relationship quality.

Our final hypothesis concerned the tendency of heavier women to partner with men with lower mate value. Individuals with lower mate value tend to have poorer quality intimate relationships, so this may contribute to the link between higher female BMI and lower relationship quality (Murray, 2005). This is consistent with prior research showing that heavier women tend to partner with less-educated (Garn, Sullivan, & Hawthorn, 1989) and less "upwardly-mobile" husbands (Lipowicz, 2003). Alternatively, men may experience decreases in self-esteem as a result of societal biases directed at them because their romantic partner is more overweight. There was no correlation between female BMI and women's ideals for a mate, indicating that heavier women have the same hopes and aspirations for their romantic partners as lighter women.

The null findings for male BMI are consistent with literature showing that weight stigma is directed at women more than at men (e.g., Crandall, 1991; Harris et al., 1991) and generally fit with prior null findings for male BMI/relationship quality (Carr & Friedman, 2006; Markey et al., 2001; cf. Sheets & Ajmere, 2005, who found that higher BMI in men was associated with higher relationship satisfaction).

The small subsample of overweight women may be viewed as a limitation of the present study. However the associations we found in this study might be more pronounced in a sample consisting of higher proportions of overweight or obese women. Since our sample was predominantly comprised of young, nonmarried couples, the same hypotheses should be tested in sample of older, married couples. Future longitudinal research will also help tease out whether heavier women's predictions about their dating relationships being less stable are accurate, and research with larger samples should test potential moderators of the associations between BMI and relationship functioning (such as women's self-esteem). Another limitation of the study is that the correlations found to be significant were of a small-to-moderate effect size (ranging from  $-.26$  to  $-.56$ ); therefore, the present findings may be viewed as preliminary.

How weight stigma operates in relationships has received little past research attention. The results from this study show that heavier women had lower quality relationships, which they predicted were less likely to remain intact. Heavier women also partnered with less desirable men, doubted their partners' regard, and were judged by male partners as further from the males' partner ideals for attractiveness. Heavier women expected to be judged more negatively by their partners than lighter women across a range of important mate evaluation categories (including the critically important domain of warmth/trustworthiness), but in reality, male partners' more negative judgments of heavier women tended to be confined to judgments of attractiveness (an important domain of partner evaluations). The present study adds to the literature on interpersonal problems caused by weight stigma and further highlights the need for research and interventions to effectively combat this pervasive and harmful form of bias.

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