The Role of the Mass Media in Promoting a Thin Standard of Bodily Attractiveness for Women

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Eating disorders appear to be more common among women than among men and more common now than they were in the past. Recent speculation has focused upon the role played by an unrealistically thin standard of bodily attractiveness for women in the promotion of these disorders. To demonstrate that this standard does play such a role, and to implicate the mass media in the promotion of this standard, it is first necessary to demonstrate that the current standard of attractiveness for women portrayed in the media is slimmer than that for men, that the portrayed standard is slimmer now than it has been in the past, and that these findings apply to many of the major media. The four studies presented here demonstrate that the current standard of attractiveness portrayed on television and in magazines is slimmer for women than for men and that the recent standard for women portrayed in magazines and in movies is slimmer than it was in the past.

Eating disorders, such as obesity and anorexia nervosa, are much more common among women than among men. Depending upon how obesity is defined, estimates of the differential incidence of obesity between men and women range from 5% of men and 12% of women to 33% of men and 40% of women (Van Itallie, 1977). For anorexia nervosa the sex difference is even

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more striking, as 90% of all anorexics are women (Druss & Henifin, 1979). Women also make up the majority of those who participate in dieting organizations such as Weight Watchers (Stunkard, Levine, & Fox, 1970).

Although the gender differences in eating disorders may be due to hormonal or psychodynamic factors, recently an explanation based on cultural factors has begun to receive attention. Orbach (1978), Kaplan (1980), and Chernin (1981), among others, have hypothesized that the socialization and treatment of women in modern American society leads women to develop eating disorders.

Various mechanisms have been suggested to explain how the sexist treatment of women may lead to eating disorders, but few of these mechanisms have been fully specified and none of them have been tested empirically. One hypothesis that is common to a number of these mechanisms is that in the late 20th century American women are under pressure to be unrealistically thin. The general idea is that some women may respond to this extreme pressure toward slimness by becoming dissatisfied with their bodies; as a result they become chronic dieters, developing anorexia, or using laxatives or vomiting, to purge themselves of excess food. The mechanisms by which obesity would result from pressures to be slim are less obvious, but they might be based upon rebellion against overly stringent control of caloric intake or upon some form of physiological rebound from a body weight maintained at too low a level. Recent work on dieting and the effects of restraint (Bennett & Gurin, 1982; Herman & Polivy, 1980; Polivy & Herman, 1983; Wooley & Wooley, 1982) lends credence to this possibility.

The mass media may play an important role in reinforcing this hypothesized pressure to be slim. In order to conclude that a slim standard of bodily attractiveness for women perpetuated by the mass media has played a role in the recent outbreak of eating disorders among women, it is first necessary to demonstrate three things: (1) That the media promote a slimmer, more weight conscious standard for women than for men. (2) That the standard of bodily attractiveness for women is slimmer now than it has been in the past. The one study that has looked at the problem empirically is that of Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, and Thompson (1980), which demonstrated that Miss America contestants and Playboy centerfolds became increasingly thinner between 1960 and 1979. Garner et al. also found that during the same period there was increasing attention to eating disorders as measured by the number of diet articles that appeared in popular women's magazines. (3) That both points 1 and 2 apply to many examples of the media.

If the standard portrayed in the media is just as slim and weight conscious for men as for women, or if it has always been equally slim, or if it is portrayed in very few places in the media, then it is unlikely to bear much responsibility for the eating disorders that have recently become so common among women. If, on the other hand, statements 1, 2, and 3 above are all found to be true, the mass media may be responsible, at least in part,