

ARTICLES

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The Relationships of Body Image, Feminism and Sexual Orientation in College Women

In this study, 409 undergraduate women completed surveys about their own body image, feminism and sexual orientation as well as their attitudes about others, that is, attitudes about weight in others, attitudes about feminism and attitudes about lesbians and gay men. There was a significant relationship between the three external measures of fat attitudes, attitudes towards feminism and attitudes towards lesbians and gay men, and it is argued that each of these three variables reflects some degree of political liberalism. We also found that the relationship between own identity and attitudes towards others was significant for feminism and sexual orientation, but non-significant for own body image and attitudes about fatness in others. Thus, the results of this study imply that fat people as a group have still not formed the kind of political or social cohesiveness that has been so advantageous to other oppressed groups, such as women or gay men and lesbians.

Few people in western cultures remain untouched by a preoccupation with body weight but, in general, women are more concerned, distressed and punished for their weight than are men. When a group of 30 adolescent girls was asked to list three wishes, the primary wish of most of them was to lose weight (Surrey, 1984). Twice as many young adult women as men in another study wished that they could be thinner, while only 2 out of 45 women (compared with 22 out of 47 men) wished that they were heavier (Silberstein et al., 1988). In a survey of middle-aged women who were asked what they would most like to change about their lives, more than half stated that they would like to lose weight (cited in Pollitt, 1982).

Not only are people concerned with their own weight, but a large body of literature has indicated that people also rate fatness¹ in others very negatively. This is true when the raters are children, adolescents and adults – including medical professionals and mental health professionals. Body weight is one of the few remaining acceptable reasons to discriminate against someone, and this is

especially true when the target is a woman (Rodin et al., 1985). Although a small subculture of 'fat activists' has formed in recent years, discrimination on the basis of weight occurs in most areas of life (Rothblum, 1994a). There is a large amount of literature describing correlates of anti-fat attitudes and, in general, researchers have discovered that being fat oneself does not predict positive attitudes about fatness in others (Crandall and Biernat, 1990). Fatness is a stigmatized identity that does not seem to yield the same kinds of in-group protections that racial or sexual minority identities have been shown to provide (Crocker and Major, 1989).

The current study is the first to consider the interrelationships between three internal variables (own body image, own feminist identification, and own sexual identity) and external factors (attitudes about others' weight, attitudes toward feminism and attitudes toward lesbians). This study had two research goals. First, it examined the interrelationships of all three external variables. We expected to find significant positive correlations between attitudes toward weight in others, attitudes toward women and attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, since these are all issues of political liberalism versus conservatism.

Crandall (1994) first identified political conservatism as a factor associated with negative attitudes toward fat people. He examined correlations between anti-fat attitudes, as measured by his 13-item Antifat Attitudes Scale (AFA), and a variety of indicators of conservatism. In a series of studies with undergraduate men and women, scores on the AFA were compared with scores of measures quantifying: (1) beliefs in a just world; (2) right-wing authoritarianism; (3) racism; (4) beliefs that poverty is caused by factors poor people could control; and (5) Protestant work ethic. All resulting correlations were significant in the predicted directions, with higher degrees of conservatism significantly associated with the Dislike and Willpower subscales on the AFA (although not with Fear of Fat). Thus, political conservatism was found to be significantly related to antifat attitudes, and students who were more politically liberal were also more accepting of fatness in others.

If attitudes about weight are related to political liberalism versus conservatism, then we speculated that attitudes about weight should also be related to attitudes about women. Many of the theories that have been offered to explain the higher rates of weight-related negative body image in women than in men have focused on women's roles in western society. For example, some feminists suggest that women use extreme dieting and weight control as symbols of control over their lives when they feel powerless in most other areas (see Gilbert and Thompson, 1996, for a review). Other feminist theories focus on the conflict that women currently face as they try to achieve academically or professionally while still conforming to social standards of feminine attractiveness (Wolf, 1991).

Similarly, sexual orientation is a factor closely linked to gender roles and political attitudes. Do lesbians differ from heterosexual women with regard to body image and attitudes about weight in others? When comparing lesbians with heterosexual women on prevalence of body image distress, protective factors

within a feminist framework have been suggested. Explanations for why lesbians may exhibit less body image dissatisfaction than heterosexual women include: (1) the lesbian community may insulate women from the effects of male-defined beauty standards; (2) feminism may be more common among lesbians and a greater degree of body-size acceptance would be a natural extension of feminist ideals; and (3) as a result of their stigmatized identity, lesbians may be more immune from the pressure of cultural standards and norms and be less vulnerable to internalizing male-defined beauty standards (see Rothblum, 1994b, for a review).

A second purpose of the current study was to examine the relationships of the three internal measures (own body image satisfaction, own feminist identification and own sexual identity) with the three corresponding external measures (attitudes about weight in others, attitudes toward women and attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, respectively). We predicted that there would be a weaker relationship between own body image and attitudes about weight in others than between own feminism and attitudes toward women and own sexual identity and attitudes toward lesbians. People do not seem to form a group identity based on their actual or perceived weight in the way that they form group identities based on their own feminism or their own sexual identity (Allon, 1982). People who self-identify as feminists can be presumed to have positive attitudes towards women and the women's movement. People who self-identify as lesbians will presumably have positive attitudes towards lesbians and gay men in general. However, people who consider themselves fat do not necessarily have positive attitudes about other fat people.

The variables described above were examined in university women in the USA. University students were sampled because of the preponderance of young adults who experience body image concerns. Women from the entire continuum of sexual identity, from exclusively lesbian to exclusively heterosexual, were recruited, because artificial demarcations of 'lesbians' versus 'bisexuals' versus 'heterosexuals' do not take into account the multiple facets of sexual identity, behavior and orientation. It was unlikely that there would be a high percentage of fat women in this sample, given the fact that US university students tend to be predominantly white and of middle-to-upper socioeconomic classes (the categories where the prevalence of fatness is lowest) and because body weight tends to be lower in younger people. Nevertheless, we expected to obtain a wide range of scores on concern with weight, because body image distress is so prevalent among women, regardless of weight. Finally, the recruitment announcement stated our desire to obtain responses from a diverse group of participants with regard to race, ethnicity and socioeconomic class but, again, since we used a university sample, it was likely that women of color and women from lower social classes would be underrepresented.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were recruited via a large mailing to 89 faculty members in the USA and Canada. These faculty members were identified using a mailing list of university colleagues of the second author; most are researchers and writers in the areas of women's studies and lesbian studies. The faculty members were sent letters requesting that they return a postcard to the experimenter indicating whether they were willing to announce the study at the end of their undergraduate classes and make the packets containing the surveys available to students near the doorways as they exited the room. When reply postcards were received from these faculty, packages containing the number of surveys they estimated they could distribute were sent to them. The survey packets each included a covering letter with instructions, the survey itself, a postage-paid, self-addressed envelope for return of the survey, and a postage-paid raffle ticket for one of two \$50 incentive prizes that could be returned separately. The purpose of this recruitment strategy was to obtain a diverse group of participants in a comparable fashion, as well as to obtain responses from university women across a wide range of geographic regions.

Measures

An extensive review was conducted of the literature on all self-report surveys related to this study. The criteria for selecting each measure were: (1) specificity to the construct; (2) sound psychometric properties; and (3) (shorter) length.

Own body image was measured with the Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ; Cooper et al., 1987). This 34-item scale (for example, 'Have you been afraid that you might become fat [or fatter]?' and 'Has being with thin women made you feel self-conscious about your shape?') is scored along a 6-point scale ('Never' to 'Always'). Item scores are summed to obtain a total score. Possible scores range from 34 to 204, with higher scores indicating a greater amount of body image distress.

Attitudes about weight in others was measured with the Antifat Attitudes Test (FAT; Lewis et al., in press). This is a 47-item measure (for example, 'Society too tolerant of fat people' or 'When fat people exercise, they look ridiculous') scored on a 5-point, Likert-type scale from 1 = 'Definitely disagree' to 5 = 'Definitely agree'.

Own feminist identification was assessed by asking respondents to indicate their agreement with the statement, 'I consider myself a feminist' on a 5-point, Likert-type scale from 1 = 'Strongly disagree' to 5 = 'Strongly agree'.

Attitudes toward women was measured by the Attitudes Toward Feminism and the Women's Movement Scale (FWM; Fassinger, 1994). This is a 10-item measure (for example, 'The women's movement has made important gains in

equal rights and political power for women' and 'Feminists are a menace to this nation and the world') of affective attitudes towards the feminist movement. Possible scores range from 10 to 50, with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement.

Own sexual identity was assessed with a modified form of the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (KSOG; Klein, 1985). Participants were asked to rate four dimensions: their physical and sexual attractions/fantasies; their sexual behavior; their emotional connection; and their self-identification during the past four years along a Kinsey-type, seven-point scale, in order to examine what the meaning of sexual orientation was to each person. These four entries were summed to create a single value for the variable of sexual orientation, with higher scores indicating greater degrees of identification as a lesbian.

Attitudes towards lesbians and gay men were measured with the Index of Homophobia (IHP; Hudson and Ricketts, 1980), which consists of 25 items (for example, 'I would feel comfortable if I learned that my daughter's teacher was a lesbian' and 'I would like my parents to know that I had gay friends') rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 = 'Strongly agree' to 5 = 'Strongly disagree'. Item scores are then summed with a score ranging from 25 to 125 (any item left blank or scored outside the range of 1 to 5 is automatically scored as 0 and is regarded as having been omitted), with higher scores indicating greater homophobia. The authors of this index assigned labels to the various score ranges, with subjects scoring from 25 to 50 as 'high grade non-homophobics', those scoring from 51 to 75 as 'low grade non-homophobics', those scoring from 76 to 100 as 'low grade homophobics' and those scoring greater than 100 as 'high grade homophobics'. Most items on this scale seem to assess 'an individual's comfort concerning proximity and involvement with homosexuals' (O'Donohue and Caselles, 1993: 184).

The *Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale, Form C* (M-C Form C; Reynolds, 1982) is a shortened version of the original Marlowe-Crowne scale, consisting of 13 of the original 33 items, and measures the impact of social desirability on self-report measures. The number of possible socially desirable responses ranges from 0 to 13, with higher scores indicating greater social desirability effects.

Demographic data. Participants were asked to complete a form created for this study that included the following demographic data: age, racial/ethnic background, religious affiliation, geographic location, whether they live in a rural, suburban or urban setting, level of education, parents' education and occupation, height and current weight.

Procedure

Questionnaires were completed anonymously by participants, with no names or identifying data written on the forms. The sequential order of questionnaires (Versions A and B of the questionnaire) was counterbalanced to control for order

effects. Demographic Information (which included the items about own feminist identification and own sexual identity) was the last section in all the packets, however, in order to avoid biasing the respondents about the questions being studied. Pilot testing revealed that it took about 30 minutes to complete all the measures.

RESULTS

Response Rate

In the original recruitment effort, letters were sent to 89 faculty members taken from a mailing list of colleagues of the second author, requesting their assistance in announcing the study and making questionnaires available to interested women in their undergraduate classes. Reply postcards were received back from 43 of these women (48 percent). Twenty-two faculty members (25 percent) responded negatively, indicating that they were not currently teaching undergraduate classes or that they would need specific permission regarding the study from their own institutional human research review board. Twenty-one of the recipients (24 percent) returned reply postcards indicating their willingness to distribute surveys and the number of women students they estimated might participate. A total of 833 surveys were forwarded to these faculty members.

An additional recruitment effort consisted of posting the same covering letter sent to the above faculty members on two internet list-servers (one serving women in psychology, the second serving fat lesbians). From these postings, eight willing faculty members responded, and a total of 189 surveys were sent to them for announcement and distribution in their classes. Finally, five personal contacts consisting of local faculty members were enlisted, and 312 surveys were forwarded to these instructors for distribution. The total number of surveys distributed through these additional recruitment efforts was 501.

The sum of all surveys sent out resulted in an overall distribution of 1334 surveys. Four hundred and nine college women returned usable completed surveys. The resulting response rate was 31 percent.

We computed *t* tests between the mean scores for the five variables on version A and version B of the survey in order to determine whether any significant differences in responding arose as a function of the varied sequential placement of the individual scales. Results showed no significant differences between mean scores on the five scales across the two versions of the survey, with the exception of the Antifat Attitudes Test (AFAT; Lewis et al., in press). The AFAT was the second scale presented in version A and the fourth scale presented in version B. Results of that *t* test were as follows: $t(406) = 3.148, p < .002$ (2-tailed). The data for version A were: $N = 198, M = 1.91, SD = .54$, and for version B were: $N = 211, M = 1.74, SD = .52$. Because the anchor points for the AFAT items range from 1 = 'Definitely disagree' to 5 = 'Definitely agree', with 2 = 'Mostly

disagree', this difference was not particularly meaningful in terms of the distance between the two means on the scale. Therefore, the data from the two versions of the survey were combined for the remaining analyses.

Demographic Information

With regard to year in university, the distribution of participants was approximately equivalent across the four years of a traditional undergraduate university career. Participant ages ranged from 17 to 57 ($M = 22.4, SD = 6.99$). The racial/ethnic identification of the participants in this study was primarily Caucasian ($N = 355, 86.8$ percent), with 14 women (3.4 percent) identifying themselves as Hispanic or Latina, 13 women (3.2 percent) identifying themselves as Asian, 9 women (2.2 percent) identifying themselves as African-American, and 3 as American Indian (0.7 percent).

Socioeconomic status for this study was computed using the Hollingshead (1975) Four Factor Index of Social Status. The equation takes into account parents' job titles and levels of education in the computation of a social status score, with a possible range of 8 to 66. Hollingshead divided the scores into five levels (or strata) including: (I) unskilled laborers and menial service workers (8–19); (II) machine operators and semiskilled workers (20–29); (III) skilled craftsmen, clerical and sales workers (30–39); (IV) medium business, minor professional and technical workers (40–54); and (V) major business and professional employees (55–66). The resulting scores for social status of the parents of the current participants ranged from 12 to 66 ($M = 46.8, SD = 11.4$). Of the 393 participants who provided socioeconomic status information, only 4 (1 percent) fell within level I. There were 22 participants (6 percent) in level II, 86 participants (22 percent) in level III, 166 participants (42 percent) in level IV and 115 participants (29 percent) in level V.

Overview of Analyses

Table 1 presents the bivariate correlation coefficients among the 10 continuous variables measured in the study. To reduce the probability of a Type I error due to the large number of comparisons, the significance level of $\alpha = .05$ was divided by 45 (the number of planned comparisons in this table) to yield a corrected significance level of $\alpha = .001$.

As Table 1 indicates, none of the questionnaires was significantly correlated with social desirability, indicating that participants were not motivated to complete questionnaires in order to 'fit in' with socially desirable responses.

Regarding the actual weight of participants, the mean body mass index (BMI; calculated as weight in kilograms divided by height in meters squared) of the participants was 22.98 ($SD = 4.58$), with a range from 16.73 to 46.99. When the data were divided up among categorical cut-offs (based on a summary of the literature by Rowland, 1989), 51 participants (13 percent) were categorized as 'Under-

TABLE 1
Intercorrelations between mean variable scores ($N = 399$)

Variable	Fat attitudes	Body image	Body mass index	Sexual orientation	Homophobic attitudes	Feminist identity	Feminist attitudes	Social desirability	Age	SES
Fat attitudes	—	.145	-.210*	-.053	.371*	-.219*	-.243*	-.109	-.055	-.024
Body image		—	.249*	-.073	.150	-.062	-.061	-.150	-.050	.026
Body mass index			—	.051	-.090	.133	.040	.061	.365*	-.106
Sexual orientation				—	-.504*	.412*	.320*	-.221*	-.046	.123
Homophobic attitudes					—	-.521*	-.472*	.018	-.045	-.091
Feminist identity						—	.726*	-.066	.031	.158
Feminist attitudes							—	-.042	.003	.067
Social desirability								—	.229*	-.151
Age									—	-.199*
SES										—

Note: Higher fat attitudes scores are more positive. Lower body image scores indicate greater satisfaction. Higher sexual identity scores indicate stronger lesbian identity. Lower homophobic attitudes scores are more positive. Higher feminist identity scores indicate stronger identification as a feminist. Higher feminist attitudes scores are more positive. Higher social desirability scores indicate more socially desirable responding. Higher SES scores indicate higher socioeconomic level. * $p < .0001$ (2-tailed)

weight' (BMI < 19.1), 296 participants (72 percent) were considered 'Average' (BMI 19.1–27.3), 38 participants (9 percent) fell into the 'Overweight' range (BMI 27.4–32.3), 13 participants (3 percent) could be considered 'Severely Overweight' (BMI 32.4–44.8), and finally, 3 participants (1 percent) fell into the category of 'Morbidly Obese' (BMI > 44.8).

For the current group of participants, the mean score obtained for the Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ; Cooper et al., 1987) was 100.06 (SD = 35.31). This mean is comparable to that obtained for a validation sample of college women ($N = 163$, $M = 96.3$, $SD = 32.8$) in a study by Rosen et al. (1996), and well below that obtained for a group of women being treated for body image distress described in the same study ($N = 155$, $M = 129.9$, $SD = 29.0$).

The women who participated in this study obtained a mean score for own feminist identity of 3.52 (SD = 1.14). A score of 1 indicated that the participant 'strongly disagreed' with the item 'I consider myself a feminist'. A score of 2 indicated that the participant 'disagreed' with the item, a score of 3 indicated that the participant was 'not certain' how much they agreed with the item, a score of 4 indicated that the participant 'agreed' with the item and a score of 5 indicated that the participant 'strongly agreed' with the item. Thus, the mean level of endorsement of feminist self-identification in this group fell between uncertainty about considering oneself a feminist and agreement about considering oneself a feminist.

Sexual orientation of the participants was primarily heterosexual, with a mean score of 6.2 (SD = 3.8). The range of scores went from 3 (exclusively heterosexual) to 21 (exclusively lesbian). Measurement of sexual orientation was originally designed to produce scores ranging from 3 (exclusively heterosexual) to 28 (exclusively lesbian) based on four separate factors (physical and sexual attractions/fantasies, sexual behavior, emotional connection, and self-identification during the past 4 years), each rated on a scale from 1 to 7. Because a significant number of participants did not respond to the item requesting that they rate their 'sexual self-identification' ($N = 37$, $\chi^2 = 275.36$, $p < .0001$), this item was dropped, and sexual orientation was based on the sum of the remaining three items. The number of participants falling into categories roughly coinciding with the Kinsey Scale (Kinsey et al., 1948, 1953) are as follows: 124 participants (31 percent) identified themselves as 'Exclusively Heterosexual' (3), 145 participants (36 percent) identified themselves as 'Mostly Heterosexual' (4–6), 84 participants (21 percent) identified themselves as 'Somewhat More Heterosexual' (7–9), 22 participants (5 percent) identified themselves as 'Equally Heterosexual and Lesbian' (10–12), 14 participants (3 percent) identified themselves as 'Somewhat More Lesbian' (13–15), 5 participants (1 percent) identified themselves as 'Mostly Lesbian' (16–18) and, finally, 12 participants (3 percent) identified themselves as 'Exclusively Lesbian' (19–21).

Relationships among External Variables

The first research question focused on the interrelationships of the three external variables: attitudes towards weight in others, attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement and attitudes towards lesbians and gay men. As Table 1 indicates the correlation between fat attitudes and attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement was small but significant, $r = -.243$ ($p < .0001$), indicating that positive fat attitudes accompany more positive views of the women's movement. The correlation between fat attitudes and the index of homophobia was $r = -.371$ ($p < .0001$), indicating that positive fat attitudes accompany positive attitudes towards lesbians and gay men. The correlation between the index of homophobia and attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement was $r = -.472$ ($p < .0001$), suggesting that positive attitudes towards lesbians and gay men accompany positive attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement.

Using *t*-tests (as described in Howell, 1992) to examine the difference between each pair of these three non-independent correlation coefficients, it was determined that each of the above correlation coefficients is significantly different from the other two. Thus, the correlation between attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement is significantly stronger than the correlation between fat attitudes and attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, which is in turn significantly stronger than the correlation between attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement and fat attitudes.

Relationships of Internal to External Variables

The second research question addresses the relationships among the three internal measures (own body image satisfaction, own feminist identification and own sexual orientation) and their corresponding external measures (attitudes about weight in others, attitudes towards women and attitudes toward lesbians and gay men). We predicted a weaker relationship between own body image and attitudes about weight in others than between own feminism and attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement, or between own sexual orientation and attitudes towards gay men and lesbians.

As Table 1 indicates, the correlation of feminist identification with attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement was $r = .726$ ($p < .0001$); that is, women who identified themselves more strongly as feminists held more positive attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement, as measured by the FWM Scale (Fassinger, 1994). The correlation between sexual orientation and attitudes towards lesbians and gay men was $r = -.504$ ($p < .0001$), reflecting that women who more strongly identified as lesbians showed more positive attitudes toward lesbians and gay men as measured by the Index of Homophobia (Hudson and Ricketts, 1980). The correlation between body image satisfaction and atti-

tudes towards weight in others was the weakest of the three, with $r = .145$ (ns), indicating that the relationship between body image and attitudes towards fat people is not significant.

We chose to use body image (a rating of perceived body size and shape) rather than actual weight (BMI) for several reasons. First, we felt that perceived body size was a better indicator of attitudes, and thus more comparable with own feminism and own sexual identity. Second, the majority of women in western cultures feel fat, even if at or below average weight, so that actual weight per se is not an indicator of how women feel about themselves. Finally, most college women are average weight, so we knew that our study would not include many women with high BMIs. Nevertheless, Table 1 includes correlations of all internal and external measures with BMI. The only variable that was significantly correlated with BMI was age, given that body weight generally increases with age.

DISCUSSION

Although body image researchers have, in the past several years, begun to examine sexual orientation as a variable related to body image satisfaction, the present study is the first to combine direct measurement of both an external weight-related construct (fat attitudes) and an internal weight-related construct (own body image). It is also the first study to directly measure this specific configuration of associated factors including attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and attitudes towards feminism, along with own sexual orientation, in an attempt to increase understanding as to how body image satisfaction may differ among people as a function of their sexual orientation or political views.

Response Rate

From the original recruitment effort of faculty asked to distribute the survey to undergraduate students, a positive response rate of 24 percent was obtained. The regional distribution of positive responders was not clearly different from the negative or non-responders. The largest proportion of responders of each type (positive and negative) was affiliated with the fields of psychology, social work, sociology and women's studies. Each of these disciplines uses research methodology similar to that of the present study, so faculty from these disciplines may have been more inclined to respond to a recruitment request from a social science colleague.

The 31 percent student response rate obtained for this survey is comparable to typical response rates in survey research, which have been noted to approximate 30 percent (Shaughnessy and Zechmeister, 1985). Because the particular recruitment procedure used for this study has not been described in prior research, it is difficult to make comparisons between similar surveys. In fact, several faculty

members who agreed to recruit participants wrote that they had never seen the present recruitment approach used before. The reader must be cautioned that the current sample is not random, and therefore generalizations cannot be made to the population at large, but rather must be restricted to groups of people similar to the participants in this study.

Demographic Information

The participants in this study were evenly distributed throughout the typical university undergraduate range of first through fourth years, with a few students reporting that they were in their fifth year of university, or beyond. The social class levels of the participants, as determined by their parents' education and occupation, were skewed toward the upper levels, with only 7 percent of participants falling in the lowest two categories of social class. These results were again expected, given that higher education is still a privilege accorded more often to the wealthy.

Body mass indices of the women in this study were accordingly low, in light of the typical finding that lower body weight accompanies higher social class and younger age. Only 13 percent of the participants had body mass indices of 'overweight' or above, with 85 percent reporting data placing them in the 'underweight' or 'average weight' categories. This weight range is similar to that found in other weight-related studies of undergraduates (Dionne et al., 1995; Tiggemann and Rothblum, 1997).

As with ethnicity, socioeconomic status and body mass, the sexual orientation of this group of participants was skewed in the direction of heterosexuality, with 12 percent of participants endorsing 'equally heterosexual and lesbian', 'somewhat more lesbian', 'mostly lesbian' or 'exclusively lesbian' identities. This left the remaining 88 percent of participants in the 'somewhat more', 'mostly' or 'exclusively heterosexual' categories. That the majority of women in this sample did not identify themselves as lesbians is not surprising considering that the average age that women experience their first intimate relationship with another woman is between 20 and 24, and the average age that women develop a positive lesbian identity is between 24 and 29 (Garnets and Kimmel, 1993). These age ranges overlap only somewhat with the average ages of the women in this sample.

Relationships among External Variables

The relationships between the three external variables of attitudes about weight (fatness) in others, attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement and attitudes towards lesbians and gay men were examined in a pair-wise fashion. Each pair of variables was significantly correlated, but none exceeded a moderate level of strength. The original hypothesis was that the three external variables would be significantly related. This hypothesis arose from the fact that each of

the three constructs seemed to relate to a continuum of political liberalism versus conservatism. That is, we speculated that positive feelings towards fat people would be more common among people who also held positive views towards feminism and towards lesbians and gay men. Although the data do support the hypothesis, the results are not as robust as was expected.

Perhaps more interesting was the fact that the relationship between attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement was significantly stronger than the other two pairs (attitudes towards lesbians and gay men with fat attitudes or attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement with fat attitudes). One explanation could be that the measurement instruments were more similar for attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement than either was to the measurement instrument for fat attitudes. On examination of the instruments, there does not seem to be greater similarity between the attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement scale (FWM) and the attitudes towards lesbians and gay men scale (IHP) than for the fat attitudes scale (AFAT). In fact, the FWM is significantly shorter and less affectively laden than the other two.

A second possible explanation could be that there is simply more variation in the way that women in this sample think and feel about fat people than in the ways that they think and feel about feminists or about lesbians and gay men. Perhaps women feel more confident that feminism and a lesbian sexual orientation are not 'contagious', but fear that fatness is something that can happen to anyone. This explanation makes a good deal of intuitive sense given the constant barrage of media information suggesting new and more effective ways to fight off extra weight. In contrast, there are few, if any, commercials on television that overtly warn women about the dangers of thinking too positively about feminism or the advances facilitated by the women's movement, or even the risks involved in becoming too intimate with one's female friends and associates.

A third possible explanation could be that attitudes towards feminism and attitudes towards lesbians and gay men may overlap somewhat. From a politically conservative viewpoint, feminists are often seen as lesbians, and gay men are seen as effeminate. Thus, attitudes towards feminism and attitudes towards lesbians and gay men may tap into similar belief systems. In contrast, attitudes towards fat people may still seem less politically charged to the general public, and therefore be somewhat more different than political opinions about feminism and lesbian or gay sexual orientation.

Relationships of Internal to External Variables

Similar to the first research question, the current data revealed that the relationships between own feminist identity and attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement and own sexual orientation and attitudes towards lesbians and gay men were both significant. The relationship between own body image satisfaction and attitudes about weight (fatness) in others was not significant,

however. These findings support the second hypothesis that the association between personal identity and attitudes about others is stronger in the case of feminism and sexual orientation than it is for weight.

As feminists, women have long recognized their second-class status, with the second wave of the women's movement beginning before most of the students in our study were born. Many colleges and universities have women's studies major and minor programs (at our university alone, there are 90 faculty members affiliated with the women's studies program). There are also feminist student organizations, and students are often able to receive course credit for research on gender issues or for providing service in feminist community organizations (volunteering at a rape crisis center or at a battered women's shelter, for example).

Although feminism has gained at least superficial acceptance by college students and the general public, the average score on the Attitudes Toward Feminism and the Women's Movement Scale (FWM; Fassinger, 1994) was between 'neutral' and 'agree' for the current group of participants, indicating neither strong feminist nor anti-feminist attitudes. Similarly, endorsement of own feminist identity was in the range between 'not certain' and 'agree', indicating attitudes that were between neutral and positive with regard to own feminism. This shift may relate to what Faludi has described as a backlash against the progress achieved by the women's movement. According to her argument, negative attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement ebb and flow: 'Just when women's quest for equal rights seemed closest to achieving its objectives, the backlash struck it down' (1991: xix).

Like feminists, lesbians have also recognized their minority status and have formed a subculture which has helped lesbian women to survive in hostile environments. It has been 25 years since the diagnosis of homosexuality as a mental illness was removed from the DSM-II (American Psychiatric Association, 1973). Very early studies of lesbians and gay men focused on psychopathology (MacDonald and Games, 1974). When the validation study for the Index of Homophobia (IHP; Hudson and Ricketts, 1980) was published, the mean score for their sample of 300 people, most of whom were college students, fell in the range of 'low grade homophobic'. This average score is 20 points higher (and therefore more homophobic) than the average score obtained by participants in the present study. This finding documents a profound shift over the last 18 years with regard to attitudes of acceptance towards lesbians and gay men.

Visible changes on college campuses have also occurred with regard to increasing acceptance of lesbians and gay men. The climate on many campuses, at least in progressive states, has become quite affirmative of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered individuals. There are courses on lesbian and gay issues, and a handful of universities are even beginning lesbian and gay studies programs.

Fat people currently experience oppression that is similar in scope to the oppression that women and lesbians and gay men formerly faced, but the forma-

tion of a 'fat subculture' is still in its infancy. There is only one nationally recognized group advocating the rights of fat people in the USA (NAAFA; the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance), the UK (Fat Women's Group), New Zealand (Beyond Dieting), Sweden (Overviktigas Riksforbund), Canada (People at Large), Germany (Dicke, e.V.), and France (Allegro Fortissimo), respectively, for example. College students are knowledgeable about weight, but this knowledge has been translated primarily into dieting, preoccupation about weight and dissatisfaction with weight, rather than into activism combating oppression on the basis of body weight. The results of this study lend support to the claim that the political movement that fat activists are beginning to form is urgently necessary and should be supported by psychologists whenever and wherever possible.

It is intriguing to speculate why the fat rights movement, which began at least 15 years ago (see Schoenfelder and Wieser, 1983), has not proliferated into hundreds of local and regional organizations and events in a way comparable to the feminist and lesbian movements. Part of the reason may be that fat people are both held responsible and blamed for their weight in ways that lesbians and feminists are not (see Rothblum, 1990). It is also possible, we would argue, that there are ways that being fat is even more radical than being feminist or lesbian. Women's refusal to look feminine (and, in the case of fatness, to take up more space) may be more threatening to the patriarchy than any specific feminist or lesbian political action.

In sum, the results of this study indicate that fat people as a group have still not formed the kind of political or social cohesiveness that has been so advantageous to other oppressed groups such as women or gay men and lesbians. Yet attitudes towards women, attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and attitudes towards fat people are interconnected. It could benefit the members of all of these groups to form coalitions to decrease the incidence of prejudice and discrimination. The present results imply that fat activists have a good deal to learn from the success that feminists and lesbians and gay men have had in altering societal views in the past. However, it cannot be ignored that fat activists also have much to teach feminist and gay and lesbian groups in terms of tolerance for diversity of body size.

NOTE

1. Not only are fat rights activists using the word 'fat', but psychologists as well have adopted the term in their research (Cash and Hicks, 1990; Crandall, 1994; Robinson et al., 1993), so we will use this term as it is more descriptive than 'overweight' (which implies a relatively 'normal' weight) and 'obese' (a medical term that implies pathology).

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