

A Cross Cultural Study of Body Image and Eating Habits Between Genders

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between body image and eating habits across cultures. Eighty college age respondents were surveyed, 40 from Galway, Ireland (20 male, 20 female) and 35 from La Crosse (15 male, 20 female). The participants filled out the Fallon and Rozin Body Image Questionnaire and the Eating Aptitudes Test (E.A.T). The Body Image Questionnaire required the participants to rate nine pictures of different body shapes, which get increasingly larger, by (a) their own current figures, (b) their ideal figures, (c) the figure thought most attractive to the opposite sex, and (d) the most attractive figure of the opposite sex. The Fallon and Rozin survey contained questions about their eating habits as well as their current age, sex, height, and varying adult weights. As hypothesized, Ireland E.A.T scores were significantly lower when compared to U.S. scores. Also, there was a significant difference in body image scores when comparing males and females between countries; males in Ireland had a larger difference between what they want to look like and what they think they look like. In contrast, females in Ireland had a smaller difference between these same ratings. Given that Ireland is a Westernized European country, it would be beneficial for future research to focus on non-westernized cultures.

INTRODUCTION

The different rates of eating disorders among international cultures are largely unknown in the field of psychology. When different rates have been found within a culture, they have been loosely attributed to socioeconomic status, familiarity of these disorders, family structure, and body image disturbances (Soh, Touyz, & Surgenor, 2006). The implication of cross cultural variation on these factors has not been substantiated.

Since the relationship between body image and eating habits is closely linked to the development of eating disorders, studying these relationships cross culturally will further the cultural research on eating disorders. Currently, there are numerous studies, done within the United States, which look at the relationship between body image and eating habits. Rozin and Fallon (1985) compared males' and females' responses to questions dealing solely with body image. Participants answered questions concerning their current figure, their ideal figure, the figure they thought would be most attractive to the opposite sex, and the figure they found most attractive of the opposite sex. Fallon and Rozin found that generally, women are less satisfied with their bodies than men. Men's current, ideal, and attractive ratings were more similar, whereas, there was a significant difference among the same comparison data of women. These findings run parallel to the fact that more females than males are diagnosed with eating disorders (DSM-IV, 2000).

Fallon and Rozin (1985) suggested that their data would be better interpreted if they had information from other cultures. Another review of eating and body image disturbances pointed out that the studies involving different cultural groups have mostly been conducted within Western nations. These cultural studies have suggested variation among cultural views of body image and eating that should be further explored by doing research in other countries besides the United States (Soh, Touyz, & Surgenor, 2006). Although it is suggested that countries outside of the United States tend to have higher body image rates and lower eating disorder prevalence (Soh, Touyz, & Surgenor, 2006), this has not been consistently reported. Some studies have found little to no differentiation among varying cultures. There is evidence that groups respond to images from western culture with decreased body satisfaction (Wildes, 2001). Further study is warranted.

The current study compared college students in La Crosse, Wisconsin and Galway, Ireland. It is hypothesized that 1) the U.S. sample would yield lower body images than the Ireland sample; 2) the US would have less healthy eating habits than the Ireland section.

METHOD

The Irish sample was comprised of forty undergraduate students from the National University of Ireland at Galway (20 male; 20 female). The United States sample included thirty-five undergraduates from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (15 male; 20 female) who received course credit for participating. The Ireland participants were a convenience sample on site at the Galway campus.

All participants completed two surveys. The first survey, the Fallon and Rozin Body Image Questionnaire (1985) contained nine pictures of different body shapes, which becomes increasingly larger (See Figure 1). The participants rated the pictures by (a) their own current figures, (b) their ideal figures, (c) the figure thought most attractive to the opposite sex, and (d) the most attractive figure of the opposite sex.

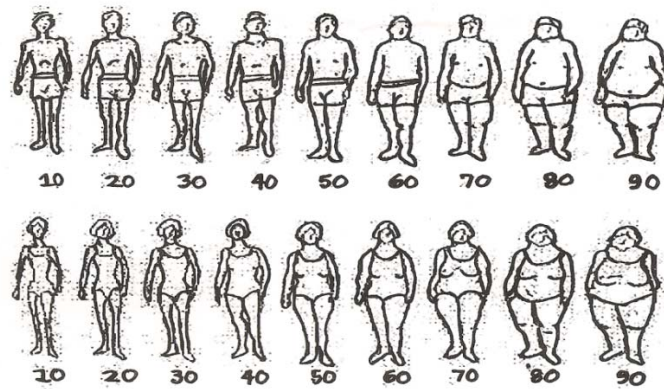


Figure 1. Body images presented as part of the Fallon and Rozin questionnaire

In the second questionnaire, the Eating Attitudes Test (E.A.T.), participants answered questions about their eating habits as well as their current age, sex, height, and varying adult weights. See Table 1 for sample questions. All participants completed an informed consent prior the study and received a written debriefing statement after the study.

Table 1. Sample Questions from the Eating Aptitudes Test (E.A.T)

Participants choose one of the following responses: Always, Usually, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, or Never

1. I find myself preoccupied with food
2. I am preoccupied with the thought of having fat on my body
3. I like my stomach to be empty
4. I feel that others pressure me to eat
5. I think about burning up calories when I exercise
6. I am terrified about being overweight
7. Other people think that I am too thin

RESULTS

I tested the difference between the E.A.T. scores of Ireland and the U.S. with an independent samples t-test, as shown in Figure 2. Ireland E.A.T. scores ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 3.65$) were significantly lower when compared to U.S. scores ($M = 10.36$, $SD = 11.39$) [$t(75) = 3.544$, $p < .05$]. These lower scores indicate better eating habits among Irish participants.

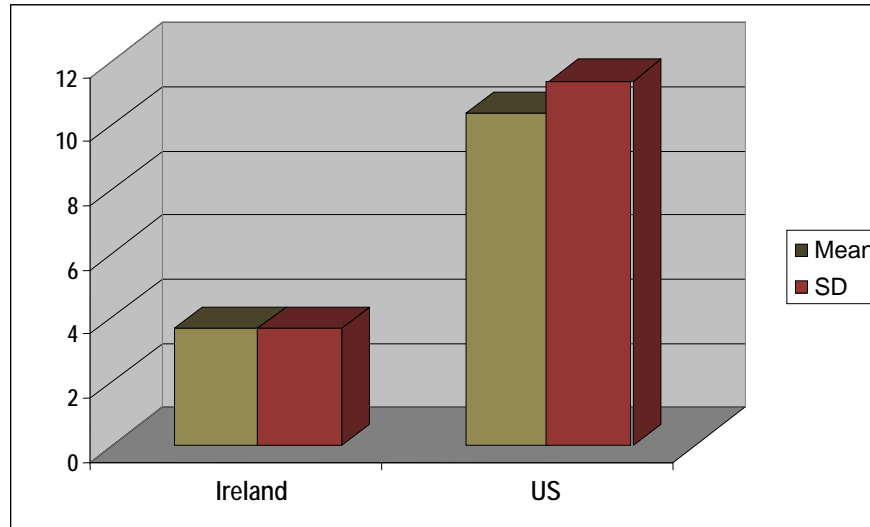


Figure 2. Means and standard deviations of E.A.T. scores among Ireland and the U.S.

When comparing body image scores males and females were considered separately. The dependent variable of “body image” was computed by calculating the difference between respondents’ ideal body image and their self perceived real body image. Country of origin affected body image scores, as shown in Table 2. Males in Ireland had a larger difference between what they want to look like and what they think they look like ($M = 7.75$, $SD = 6.17$) than did males in the U.S. ($M = 0.29$, $SD = 11.79$) [$t(35) = -2.46$, $p < .05$]. In contrast, females in Ireland had a smaller difference between these numbers ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 6.28$) when compared to U.S. females ($M = 12.05$, $SD = 8.95$) [$t(40) = 2.92$, $p < .05$].

DISCUSSION

The current study found a significant difference in body image and eating habits with respect to gender and culture. When comparing the E.A.T. scores of participants in the United States and Ireland, U.S.’s scores were significantly higher. This suggests that the Irish culture, on average, exhibit less problematic eating habits. It is possible that these poor eating habits contribute to, or are a result of, decreased body image satisfaction. Similar to the findings of Fallon and Rozin (1985), men had similar scores among their ideal and real body image ratings. However, it was found that men from the Ireland sample had a larger gap between their “current” ideal body ratings than did the U.S. sample. The average Irish male, according to the data, wanted his body to be larger. This suggests that there is a cultural difference in the amount of societal pressure on males to strive to be larger than what they currently are. In contrast, while the Ireland women displayed little dissatisfaction with their current body images, the U.S. women illustrated a more traditional pattern of wanting to be thinner than their current body image perceptions. This could be attributed to societal implications of thinness that are seen throughout the U.S., particularly in the media. Previous studies have shown that women show higher rates of internalized body dissatisfaction than men and that these rates can be partially attributed to media exposure (Van Den Berg et al., 2007).

In general, the findings follow those previously published suggesting that countries outside of the United States tend to have higher body image rates and lower eating disorder prevalence (Soh, Touyz, & Surgenor, 2006). The sample collected was from limited geographical areas within each country and did not adequately explore the diversity of the United States and Ireland. The sample was also small in number of participants. It would be beneficial for future research to be done on a larger geographical scale in order to expand the diversity of the study, gain a larger number of participants, and improved generalization. It would also be advantageous to collect data from non-westernized countries as well. The structure of this study, while valuable, compared two societies with relatively similar cultures. The assessment of participants in a non-westernized society would allow a more elaborated understanding of cross cultural variations in eating habits and body image.

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