

# MEDIA AND MENTAL HEALTH MYTHS: DECONSTRUCTING BARBIE AND BRIDGET JONES

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For much of the past two decades, discussions about the media's influence on American women's mental health have often focused on a cluster of distinct but closely related theses. Many journalists, and countless culture and media pundits, claim that most women are involved in a physically and psychologically damaging battle with their weight and inability to live up to social ideals. This, in turn, is allegedly leading most women to eating disorders, body dissatisfaction, and low self-esteem. Though these claims have been widely repeated in books, news media, and journals both popular and scholarly, the factual and logical foundations of these assumptions have received very little critical attention.

## THE BATTLE OVER BARBIE

Since her introduction in 1959, Barbie Millicent Roberts has been ridiculed and subjected to feminist attacks and public pressure campaigns over her figure. Barbie, a cultural icon, is certainly ripe for satire and social criticism. But children have plenty of dolls and toys that do not rouse the ire and venom of critics the way Barbie does. She is a physical role model, her critics insist (without evidence, as we shall see)—and an impossibly proportioned one at that. *Time* magazine columnist Amy Dickinson has no patience with the doll: “Women my age know whom to blame for our own self-loathing, eating disorders and distorted body image: Barbie” (Dickinson, 2000, p. 52).

Ophira Edut, in her introduction to *Adios Barbie: Young Women Write about Body Image and Identity* (1998), tells Barbie (who she describes as having “thighs like number-two pencils”) that the evidence is clear, and the issue is closed: “You’re busted, Babs. You’ve been found guilty of inspiring fourth-grade girls to diet, of modeling an impossible beauty standard . . .” (p. xix). Sharlene Hesse-Biber, in her 1997 book *Am I Thin*

*Enough Yet?*, writes that Barbie’s dimensions “include exaggerated breasts, impossibly long legs, nonexistent hips, and a waist tinier than a Victorian lady’s. This is the perfect figure presented to little girls as ‘ideal’” (p. 28–29). A similar argument has been suggested for hypermasculine male action figures, principally in research by Harrison Pope (see, for example: Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999). In his book *The Adonis Complex* (2000), Pope suggests that young boys who play with action figures that exhibit exaggerated, muscular physiques may develop feelings of physical inadequacy and turn to steroids or over-exercise in a quest to match the dolls’ “ideal.”

An article by clinical psychologist Liz Dittrich on the Web site *About-Face* is typical of the information on the Web: “Repeated exposure to the thin ideal via the various media can lead to the internalization of this ideal. It also renders these images achievable and real. Until women are confronted with their own mirror images they will continue to measure themselves against an inhuman ideal. Ninety percent of all girls ages 3 to 11 have a Barbie doll, an early role model with a figure that is unattainable in real life” (Dittrich, 1996, ¶ 1).

Is Barbie really “an early role model” presented as an “ideal?” After all, children play with many toys and see countless images, few of which they presumably see as realistic or even attainable ideals. I found no evidence that messages about Barbie, implicit or explicit, lead children

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to view the doll's form as an ideal. Assumptions linking Barbie to young girls' mental health issues have been widely accepted, but evidence remains sparse at best. The link has been *assumed* instead of *verified*. I tried to track down exactly who first posited that fashion models or dolls were ideal images—what his or her evidence was. It was a long and largely fruitless task. I looked up the source for each book or article I read that made that claim. Often the source had simply made the same assumption, or quoted it from somewhere else. Peer-reviewed medical and professional journals, whose articles would presumably have to cite their sources, gave few hints.

The closest I could come to pinning down an early citation for the claim was in a 1991 article in *Perceptual and Motor Skills* by Elaine Pedersen and Nancy Markee. In their study titled “Fashion Dolls: Representations of Ideals and Beauty,” Pedersen and Markee collected a sample of 15 fashion dolls and compared the body proportions to a “fashion model ideal” and the Greek model of beauty. They concluded that “the fashion doll's proportions, including those of Barbie, did not represent either the Greek ideal or the fashion model's body proportions. They do not represent an healthy individual's body proportions” (p. 94). This conclusion—widely repeated in body-image literature—is self-evident. *Of course* fashion dolls do not represent a healthy individual's body proportions; they were never claimed to (nor were they designed to) accurately represent a healthy, realistic human body. Apparently unable to find any research studies to support their assumption that girls perceive fashion dolls as ideals, the authors refer instead to a feature article in *Allure*, a women's fashion magazine.

Pedersen and Markee write that “currently, fashion model's body proportions, not the Greek ideal, are recognized as an ideal body type” (p. 93). This assumption is common in the literature, but is it true? Do all fashion models necessarily exhibit “an ideal body type”? *Attractive* is not the same as *ideal*, and one study (ORC, 1999), for example, found that the vast majority of girls (almost 90%) characterized ultra-thin model Kate Moss's body type as unattractive. Pedersen and Markee do provide a reference for this assumption—not to an article in a peer-reviewed journal but to a 1986 book titled *Individuality in Clothing Selection and Personal Appearance*. I obtained a copy of the book and reviewed it trying to find their source (Pedersen and Markee neglected to provide a page number). I was unable to find a source for their assertion—which is, after all, the very basis of their article. I tried to contact the authors but they did not respond.

I then turned to another passage in Pedersen and Markee's article that seemed to promise a source: “The use of dolls in play may influence the development of one's body image and may result in a child comparing his own body to that of a doll's” (p. 93). The citations referred to a 1980 book, *Visual Design in Dress*; a 1986 book, *Toys as Culture*; and a 1987 journal article on dolls and black female stereotypes. The journal article, it turns out, simply repeated the claim from a 1952 book on race awareness. The trail more or less stops there, but since Barbie was not produced until 1959, the discussion could not have included modern dolls such as Barbie.

The best support, apparently, for the underlying assumptions linking body image concerns to “realistic” dolls is not grounded in solid evidence, not published in medical, psychological, or social journals—but instead in general books on toys and dress.

I assumed I just was not looking in the right places; surely there was good evidence for a belief as widely held—and so often repeated by experts and authors—as this was. I contacted Ophira Edut and Sharlene Hesse-Biber, two well-known experts on the topic. Both are authors of articles and books on body image and young women, and Hesse-Biber is a sociology professor at Boston College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. If anyone should have the information at their fingertips, it should be these two. Hesse-Biber told me: “I don't know of any particular research that has examined the impact of playing with Barbie dolls on young girls' sense of their own body image.” She suggested I contact Edut, who was also unable to provide any supporting evidence, saying: “I don't actually have the answer to your question, unfortunately. A worthy one to research.”

It is indeed worthy of research, and that research should have been done 20 years ago, before it became a tenet of body image discussions. Despite assertions in dozens of books, magazine articles, news reports, research studies, and Web sites, I was unable to find a single scientific survey, poll, or study that indicated girls view Barbie as a realistic ideal.

## EATING DISORDERS AND MEDIA IMAGES

Criticism of media images has gone beyond mainstream journalism and feminist tomes. Some eating disorder researchers have embraced the reputed link between Barbie, thin models, and anorexia. In fact, a study published in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders* asserted: “It is *generally accepted* [*italics added*] that the sociocultural model offers the most

supported theoretical explanation for our society's high level of body image disturbance, body dissatisfaction, and the increasing rate of eating disorders among women" (Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996; p. 199). The prestigious British Medical Association also weighed in on the issue in a 2000 report criticizing thin women in the media (British Medical Association Board of Science and Education, 2000).

Virtually any news segment or article in the popular media on body image, eating disorders, or weight concerns will implicate thin, "idealized" images as the culprit. Often writers posit the claim as a self-evident truth; for example, in the May 2007 *Psychology Today*, Jay Dixit (Dixit, 2007) began a piece about *male* self-esteem: "When women read beauty magazines and get bludgeoned by endless images of skeletally thin models sporting bikinis in subzero sizes, they quite naturally feel bad about their own bodies." That same month, in *Discover* magazine, Douglas Rushkoff described the reality TV show *America's Next Top Model* as "observing what young anorexics are willing to do to one another" (Rushkoff, 2007), apparently assuming that all fashion models are afflicted with anorexia nervosa.

It thus appears that the facts are in and the issue is settled: "ideal" images cause eating disorders. But where did all this come from? Cause-and-effect links are complex, especially in psychological and social sciences, and simply asserting a statement as a seemingly obvious and proven fact does not make it so. Casual readers of the information on the topic will not find this limitation mentioned, but despite the widespread acceptance of these beliefs, the underlying assumptions are unsupported and the evidence is tenuous at best. *Despite two decades of research, the link between eating disorders and media images has not been established.*

The popular media suggest that thin models and actresses inspire self-loathing in women and young girls across the country. The claims are familiar to most of us, presented as established fact instead of inadequately tested theory. Social critics and journalists repeat the claims and factoids, blithely unaware that much of what they repeat is conjecture.

Here's what some of the leading researchers, published in peer-reviewed journals, have to say about the link between eating disorders and media images:

- "The impact of media images on adolescents' body image and thin ideal endorsement has been consistently asserted in the body image literature, yet has remained inadequately tested. . . . Concrete evidence is still necessary . . . to show that this existence of thin

images and ideals has an effect on viewers. . . . Findings have not been consistent. . . . At this point, the relationship between television exposure and body image disturbance remains in question" (Botta, 1999, p. 25).

- A comprehensive review of the literature supports the notion that "there is a great deal of theorizing and media criticism available, but far too little systematic research" (British Medical Association, 2000, p. 31).
- "The role of sociocultural factors in the etiology of eating disorders has been widely accepted. Nevertheless, how or by whom the pressure to be thin is transmitted to young girls remains unclear" (Field et al., 1999, p. 2).
- "Despite the popular belief that the thin standard of female attractiveness currently presented in the media is a primary contributor to the high level of concern with body weight among women, experimental studies have not shown that exposure to media images increases women's weight concern. . . . Given that most researchers and practitioners generally accept these ideas, it is somewhat surprising that experimental investigations have not found a link between exposure to the media ideal and increased concern with weight" (Posavac, Posavac, & Posavac, 1998, pp. 187, 188).
- "The media are often blamed for spreading the message that women must be thin, and for making women feel badly about themselves. This view seems overly simplistic, however, ignoring the fact that women voluntarily expose themselves to thin media images, that such exposure can actually be pleasurable, and that most women exposed to this message do not develop eating disorders" (Polivy & Herman, 2004, p. 1).

While some studies have suggested a negative effect of thin media images on body satisfaction, those studies often make significant unsupported assumptions and contain methodological flaws that limit their conclusions. For example, many studies (e.g. Pinhas, Toner, Ali, Garfinkel, & Stuckless, 1999; Posavac, Posavac, & Posavac, 1998) assumed without justification that fashion models necessarily represent the social beauty ideal; but which studies concluded that Kate Moss and Cindy Crawford have the "perfect" bodies? Other studies (including Pinhas et al., 1999) failed to differentiate between *thin* and *attractive* measures in their controls; did subjects feel worse after seeing fashion models because the models were thinner than they were, or because the models were prettier, or more glamorous? One study (Monteath & McCabe, 1997) that used video

monitors to allow women to judge and adjust their perceived weight failed to account for the fact that images appear larger on-screen than in real life, thereby biasing the women to overestimate their body size.

Perhaps the majority of studies (e.g., Stice & Shaw, 1994; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994) were conducted using subjects with bulimic symptomatology—that is, those with preexisting body image issues. The fact that body image dissatisfaction was found in women who previously had body image disturbances should surprise no one, and how generalizable these results are to non-disordered women remains an open question. This same problem plagued a recent meta-analysis of 25 studies of thin images on body satisfaction (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). The study concluded that “results support the sociocultural perspective that mass media promulgate a slender ideal that elicits body dissatisfaction.” Yet, as the authors admit, “one half the studies included in the meta-analysis did not measure dispositional body dissatisfaction before exposing participants to images of the thin ideal” (p. 12). If one is trying to measure body dissatisfaction, it would seem important to establish a baseline from which to begin. The meta-analysis also makes generalizations such as that “during late childhood and early adolescence...females who do not have the ideal body shape agonize about their bodies.” Yet (as I discuss in the next section) according to many polls and surveys, the vast majority of females reports being satisfied with their bodies (e.g., British Medical Association, 2000; USA Weekend, 1998) and only a minority of them try to “mold their bodies into the slender shape,” as judged by the percentage of dieters (Davis, 2002; ORC, 1999; Marketing Research Resources, 2000).

Demand characteristics—subjects reporting what they expect the experimenter wishes to hear—constitute a bias inherent in body image research that has yet to be thoroughly addressed. Naomi Wolf, in the preface to the 2002 10th anniversary edition of her book *The Beauty Myth*, noted that “education about the dangers of obsessive dieting or exercise is widespread, and information about eating disorders, their addictive nature, and how to treat them is available in every bookstore, as well as in middle schools, doctors’ offices, gyms, high schools, and sororities. Today, you would be hard-pressed to find a twelve-year-old girl who is not all too familiar with the idea that ‘ideals’ are tough on girls, that they are unnatural, and that following them too slavishly is neither healthy nor cool” (p. 3). Thus many study subjects (young women) have previously been told that media images of thin women are likely to make them feel badly about their

bodies. This may partly explain why the majority of subjects who are asked about body satisfaction and self-esteem *outside* of the context of thin media image studies report being generally happy with their appearance.

There may exist some effect to be teased out of the body of studies, but the repeated assertions of a clear and robust link between media images and eating disorders is simply not supported by a careful reading of the literature.

### AMERICA’S WEIGHT OBSESSION?

Part of the reason many have come to accept the link between media images and eating disorders is because the notion that weight and body shape are central issues in women’s lives has become firmly ingrained in American culture. The assertion has been repeated so often—and seems so self-evident—that it has adopted a patina of dogma. In an interview with sex and relationship expert Dr. Drew Pinsky in the June 2004 issue of *Oprah*, one question posed by writer Liz Brody was, “Women spend their lives trying to get thin enough to be attractive. Are we wasting our time?” (Elins, 2004).

America’s weight obsession is also reflected in its popular entertainment: *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Fielding, 1998), the best-seller-turned-film, follows one young woman’s continual, doomed quest for self-improvement, mostly obsessing about her weight and her thighs. According to an *Elle* magazine review blurb available at Amazon.com, the novel reflects a lifestyle that is “universal and horrifyingly familiar” to women. In a segment of the television newsmagazine *48 Hours Investigates* (2003), correspondent Lesley Stahl interviewed Jamie Lee Curtis and Christie Brinkley, who both spoke about the impossible ideals in the media to which young women are exposed. Stahl commented that, “all these young girls are on these starvation diets.”

Yet nowhere else in the program did Stahl mention “all these young girls . . . on these starvation diets.” That was the first time in the broadcast that the topic came up; no statistics or clarifying comments were offered, just the “everybody knows” assertion that young girls are on starvation diets. Clearly Stahl was assuming facts not based on evidence. Instead of practicing responsible journalism and trying to tease out the evidence underlying the claims, Stahl simply lumped together eating disorders, starvation diets, media images, and fashion modeling as if the connections were self-evident and well established.

*The Beauty Myth* (2002) author Naomi Wolf states that three quarters of women are dieting. On *In the Mix*,

an Emmy-winning youth-oriented television broadcast on PBS, host Andrea Barrow stated that “the average American woman wears a size 10 or larger, not a 2 or 3 like the average model. This is causing 90 percent of women to constantly diet or have eating disorders” (Barrow, 1997).

Even the British Medical Association (2000) claimed that “it has been estimated that 25% of men diet at some point in their lives, compared to 95% of women” (p. 22). At first glance this number is surprisingly high; however, because the 95 percent number reflects people who have *dieted at any point in their lives*, it is meaningless unless we know the average age at which that question was asked. A teenager will give a very different response to that question than a 65-year-old woman.

These sorts of statistics make for good alarmist copy, but they are misleading. Although there is no doubt that some Americans are dieting and trying to lose weight, there is no evidence that most Americans (or even most young women) are obsessed with weight loss or are dieting unnecessarily.

We are continually told in the media what an overwhelmingly important issue weight is for young women. Yet according to a 1999 survey of 901 British women between the ages of 18 and 24, more than one third do not weigh themselves, one half do not diet, and fewer than one fifth diet most or all of the time. (ORC, 1999, p. 5).

How important is losing weight to American women? Apparently not very. According to a 2002 survey published in *USA Today* (Davis, 2002), only one out of every five women said losing weight was a top priority. Women said that reducing their debt was more important than reducing their dress size. In 2000, *People* magazine (Marketing Research Resources, 2000) surveyed one thousand women aged 18 to 55. Only one quarter had dieted at any point in the last year, and the majority wanted to have a body like that of heavyset actress Camryn Manheim instead of thin Calista Flockhart.

Even if a perfectly valid statistic came out saying that two thirds of Americans were dieting at any given time, that would be welcome news, as that figure is approximately the percentage of Americans who are overweight and *should* be on a diet and exercise regimen. Without mentioning if those people need to diet, the raw number of dieters is meaningless.

### THE SELF-ESTEEM MYTH

Part of the reason that activists bring up the “dieting crisis” is to highlight the epidemic of dieting, presum-

ably in response to thin media images. The reason so many people are dieting, so the story goes, is not because they are unhealthily overweight but because they are unhappy with the way they look. This, in turn, is said to lead to mental illness, low self-esteem, and depression. Some researchers (e.g., Cash, 1997; Grant & Cash, 1995) have found success using cognitive-behavioral therapy in treating body dissatisfaction. There is no question that body dissatisfaction, like anorexia, exists as an important mental health issue. The question is: How widespread is the problem? The assumption often found in the media and conventional wisdom is that most, if not all, women are dissatisfied with their appearance or bodies. Mary Pipher, author of *Reviving Ophelia* (1995), the best-seller about teenage girls, claims that “research shows that virtually all women are ashamed of their bodies.” Katie Couric (1997) declared, “‘I hate my body’ was the destructive mantra of the 1990s.”

In contrast to *Bridget Jones Diary* and conventional wisdom, polls and surveys find most Americans generally happy with themselves. According to a 2001 Associated Press article (Dreyfuss, 2001), “most Americans can live with being fat and getting too little exercise. . . . They think they’re fine just as they are.” The piece reported a survey for the health club industry that found nearly three quarters of respondents said they were generally satisfied with their health.

*USA Weekend* (1998) conducted one of the largest surveys ever taken of American youth. Titled “Teens and Self-Image,” it surveyed over a quarter of a million students in grades 6 to 12. Among the results: 93% of teens feel good about themselves. When asked, “In general, how do you feel about yourself?” 49% responded “really good” and 44% said “kind of good.” Sixty-five percent of respondents said they were self-confident, and when asked “How satisfied are you with your looks?” 31% said “very” and 63% said “somewhat.” Only 6 percent said they were not at all satisfied with their looks. Lest one be tempted to suggest that these responses do not reflect girls’ opinions, the majority of respondents, 57%, were female. (The sample consisted of 272,400 teens; the results were not scientific, as the respondents were self-selected.)

One Gallup poll (1999) found that 53% of respondents described their personal weight situation as “about right.” When asked how they would describe their physical appearance, 54% said average while 42% described themselves as above average. Only 3% of respondents considered themselves below average in attractiveness. A more recent Gallup poll of more than 5,000 adults

around the world found that 90% of Americans are confident in their looks (cited in Davis, 2002). And a 2004 survey of 3,200 women from 10 countries, called “The Real Truth About Beauty: A Global Report,” found that only 10% of women were “somewhat or very dissatisfied” with their beauty (Campaign for Real Beauty, 2004). The study was conducted by research firm StrategyOne in collaboration with Dr. Nancy Etcoff and the Massachusetts General Hospital/ Harvard University, and with the expert consultation of Dr. Susie Orbach of the London School of Economics.

Barbie and thin models are supposedly especially damaging to young girls because they see the ideals in their formative teen and preteen years, just when their self-esteem is the lowest. In 2000, the British Medical Association issued a report that concluded: “Despite increasing academic success and participation in public life, many young women appear to be suffering from a crisis of low self-esteem. A recent survey . . . questioned 901 women aged 18 to 24 about their influences, sources of self-esteem, body image, and eating habits” (p. 34).

Oddly, the study the BMA cites as evidence that many young women are “suffering from a crisis of low self esteem” (ORC International, 1999, p. 9) says quite the opposite: “The majority of young women (88 percent) say they are of average or above average self-confidence with only 12 percent saying they’re not very confident.” When girls were asked what makes them most attractive, nearly half (49%) chose not looks but instead personality; sense of humor came in at 17%, looks ranked third with 12%, and figure—the *measure most closely tied to body shape*—was rated at only 8%. Despite repeated alarmist media pronouncements, young women’s self-esteem seems to be doing quite well. Furthermore, researchers such as Roy Baumeister (2001) have questioned the value of promoting self-esteem in addressing psychopathologies.

I do not claim that all or most people are entirely satisfied with their weight or appearance. It is natural—and beneficial—to be dissatisfied with ourselves in some ways, and most of us are well aware of our imperfections. Yet studies show that while we recognize those flaws, most of us do not continually obsess over them, and certainly not to the point of endangering our health.

While the body of evidence indicating significant genetic (e.g., Grice et al., 2002) and biochemical (e.g., Frank et al., 2005) etiologies for eating disorders has grown more robust, evidence for the sociocultural model—which has dominated the discussion for decades—remains essentially stagnant. Researchers have spent 20 years studying the links between body

image, “ideal” media images, and eating disorders. Yet the conclusions remain tentative and heavily qualified; the one thing that researchers agree upon is that more research is necessary. Perhaps what is truly needed is a reexamination of the premises underlying previous studies. Do thin fashion models, Barbie dolls, and *Playboy* models truly represent some sort of agreed-upon female ideal, as is often claimed? Do girls and women actually view fashion dolls and models as achievable, realistic body shape ideals? If the media influences are as pernicious and pervasive as often stated, why is the incidence of anorexia so low (about 1%), and why do most women and girls report being satisfied with their appearance?

Body image, self-esteem, media influences, and eating disorders are important social, medical, and mental health issues. Tragically, because of political activism, poor journalism, and a failure of researchers to examine underlying premises, discussion of these issues has become muddled with misinformation. Researchers and the news media must do a better job of separating evidence-grounded, research-based facts from theory and speculation.

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