



BODY IMAGE AND IDEALIZED IMAGES

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As the discussant for this session, I was pleased to comment on these three excellent studies. Each dealt with problems with women's body image in relation to idealized images created and promulgated by the media in the western world. While twenty years ago models weighed 8% less than the average woman, today's models weigh 23% less. The gulf between the ideal and the real is a chasm for women, the vast majority of whom overestimate the size of their bodies and diet to reach a nearly unattainable ideal. As a result, eating disorders are rampant. These three studies acknowledge that women strive to attain idealized images set by the media and in doing so practice some very unhealthy behaviors. The salient question is why do women jeopardize their health and lives to attain an idealized image? A holistic understanding of the underlying societal issues needs to be explored.

A sociology of the body perspective can help us examine societal control of both the internal and external body. Turner (1984) pointed to a dysfunctional gender balance within patriarchal societies to explain how eating disorders are related to the social control of women's bodies. To get to the heart of these emotional issues, we need to use qualitative methods. We need to study both men and women who have high self-esteem and are able to resist the power of idealized images. By looking at those who successfully control their own bodies, we might learn strategies to combat the power of idealized images.

Turner, B. (1984). The body and society. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.