

Valuing thinness or fatness in women Reevaluating the effect of resource scarcity

Carol R. Ember^{a,*}, Melvin Ember^a, Andrey Korotayev^b, Victor de Munck^c

^aHuman Relations Area Files at Yale University, New Haven, CT, United States

^bCenter for Civilizational and Regional Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia

^cState University of New York at New Paltz, United States

Initial receipt 2 September 2003; final revision received 4 February 2005

Abstract

Brown and Konner [Brown, P. J., & Konner M. (1987). *Ann. N.Y. Acad. Sci.*, 499, 29–46] proposed that plumpness or moderate fatness is valued in most preindustrial societies because of fat's adaptive value during periods of resource scarcity. Using three measures of resource scarcity, we tested the hypothesis that societies with little or no such scarcity value thinness in women, whereas those with high scarcity value plumpness. In one cross-cultural sample, the evidence was significantly opposed to this hypothesis, and in a second, resource scarcity and valuation of fatness were unrelated. We explore possible reasons for the contradiction between these results and those of Anderson, Crawford, Nadeau, and Lindberg [Anderson, J. L., Crawford, C. B., Nadeau J., & Lindberg T. (1992), *Ethol. Sociobiol.*, 13, 197–227], who reported a positive relationship between resource scarcity and plumpness being beautiful and conclude that their measure of scarcity was, in fact, a measure of food storage, which modulates the relationship: Resource scarcity and valuing fatness in women are negatively associated when there is little or no food storage and unrelated when there is moderate or high storage. Finally, we retest the possible effects of climate and male dominance suggested by Anderson et al., finding that some measures of male dominance indeed predict valuing fatness in women, but we suggest that considering these to be measures of “protest masculinity” rather than male dominance may better account for the results.

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Keywords: Fatness; Thinness; Resource scarcity; Male dominance; Cross-cultural research

* Corresponding author. Human Relations Area Files, 755 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511, United States. Tel.: +1 203 764 9401; fax: +1 203 764 9404.

E-mail address: carol.ember@yale.edu (C.R. Ember).

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doi:10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2005.02.001

1. Introduction

In most cultures, the ideal female form is not thin. According to [Brown and Konner \(1987\)](#), 81% of societies in a Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) sample preferred plump or moderately fat women, and 90% preferred large or fat hips and legs. (Few anthropological reports discuss preferred male body types.) Brown and Konner suggest that plumpness is generally adaptive because fat stores allow people to survive periods of scarcity, as well as being associated with earlier menarche, successful pregnancies, and adequate lactation. But if this be so, why is thinness valued in some cultures (even some preindustrial ones)? At the least, one might expect that these will be cultures with little resource scarcity, and a study by [Anderson, Crawford, Nadeau, and Lindberg \(1992\)](#) supported this hypothesis. However, the research reported here does not.

Although the ethnographic record indicates that plumpness is widely preferred, fatness is disparaged in the modern West, especially by elites. This negativity is bolstered by evidence that severely overweight (obese) people have elevated rates of diabetes, heart disease, and some cancers. However, Brown and Konner point out that obesity is rare outside modern societies, and that women have more subcutaneous fat than men do. Given the prevalence of recurrent food shortages in human history, Brown and Konner theorize that storing energy in the form of fat would have been particularly adaptive for ancestral women, but that obesity would hardly ever have occurred so that thinness would typically indicate poor health, and plumpness good health. However, this does not help us understand why female thinness would ever be valued.

We began this research with the goal of testing this hypothesis: *Societies with greater resource scarcity will have more positive valuations of fatness in women.*

We were initially unaware that [Anderson et al. \(1992\)](#) had tested the same hypothesis, and when we realized that our results contradicted theirs, we sought to discover why. All tests in this paper were made on worldwide samples of mostly preindustrial societies, ranging in complexity from societies with autonomous communities to states with three or more levels of political hierarchy. The materials from which most variables have been coded are full-text ethnographic accounts written by anthropologists and other observers.

2. Methods

2.1. Samples

2.1.1. Sample 1

Our initial sample consists of those 24 societies that occur in both the [Murdock and White \(1969\)](#) “Standard Cross-Cultural Sample” (SCCS) of 186 societies and the 60-culture HRAF Probability Sample Files (PSF; [Lagacé, 1979](#); [Naroll, 1967](#)) that match on time and place focus in Ember’s (1992) concordance of cross-cultural samples and that could be coded by us on the valuation of fatness. Both the SCCS and PSF were designed to represent preindustrial societies worldwide and to minimize historical relatedness by dividing the world into culture areas and choosing one culture per area. The PSF uses 60 culture areas, the SCCS, 200; for

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