



## Does “body talk” improve body satisfaction among same-sex couples?



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 21 December 2016

Received in revised form 15 August 2017

Accepted 15 August 2017

#### Keywords:

Body image

Body satisfaction

Romantic partners

Same-sex couples

Body talk

### ABSTRACT

Research suggests the important role of romantic partners in shaping how individuals feel about their bodies (e.g., Markey & Markey, 2013, 2014), but the processes that result in changes in body satisfaction within relationships have rarely been examined. To investigate how partners may potentially affect body image, 72 lesbian couples and 72 gay male couples (total  $N = 288$ ) completed body image assessments on their own and with the help of their partners. Multilevel modeling revealed that both men and women reported an improvement in body satisfaction after talking with their partners while completing the body image assessment together. Improvement in body satisfaction appeared to result from participants' reconsideration of their body ideals, not their appraisal of their current bodies. Implications of these findings for improving body image in the context of relationships are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Body image refers to the feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors individuals have pertaining to their own bodies (Gillen & Markey, 2016b). Body image concerns are not merely superficial preoccupations that affect young people. Rather, these concerns are prevalent among many groups and have significant consequences for mental and physical health, notably increased risk for eating disorders, depression, and obesity (Gillen & Markey, 2016b). It is important, therefore, to understand the contexts in which body image concerns can develop. Multiple social forces shape body image including family, friends, media, communities and romantic partners (Gillen & Markey, 2016b; Tylka & Andorka, 2012). Romantic partner influences may be especially important among adults. Many adults in romantic relationships likely share living space and free time with romantic partners, rely on them for emotional support, and engage in physically intimate behaviors with them where their bodies are visible. Comments from romantic partners such as, “You look so handsome today!” “Are you sure you want to eat that?” or “Do you think you should go to the gym later?” are powerful ways to convey how they feel about their partner's body (Bailey & Ricciardelli, 2010; McLaren, Kuh, Hardy, & Gauvin, 2004). In the

current study, we examined “body talk” among same-sex couples, and its associations with body satisfaction.

“Body talk” refers to verbal communication about one's own appearance-related concerns. Discussion topics such as weight, size, hair, clothing style, or muscularity may be considered “body talk.” This term developed from the idea of “fat talk” where one individual claims that she is fat and another reassures her that she is not (Nichter, 2000). “Body talk,” however, is a broader term that encompasses not just conversations about weight, but other appearance-related issues as well. “Fat talk” has often been studied among women, typically adolescent girls, college women, and in some research, their mothers (Arroyo & Andersen, 2015; Corning & Gondoli, 2012; Nichter, 2000). Although “fat talk” may encourage social bonding among girls and women, it is usually discussed as a negative experience for girls and women with implications for lower well-being (e.g., Arroyo & Andersen, 2015; Nichter, 2000; Corning & Gondoli, 2012). In contrast, “body talk” may be beneficial for those who engage in it, particularly romantic partners. Previous research demonstrates that romantic partners tend to have positive appraisals of each other's bodies and that individuals are more satisfied with their partners' bodies than their partners think they are (Markey, Markey, & Birch, 2004; Markey & Markey, 2006). “Body talk,” then, could be a context for romantic partners to express positive feelings about their partner's body.

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### 1.1. Theories of romantic partner influence

Communication with a romantic partner about one's body has been conceptualized as an important social influence on body image, suggesting that body image is not just an individual variable but a "couple" variable as well (Gillen & Markey, 2016b). Research suggests the important role of romantic partners in shaping how individuals feel about their bodies (e.g., Markey & Markey, 2013, 2014), although the processes that result in changes in body satisfaction within relationships has received little empirical consideration. Several theories highlight the mechanisms through which this change may occur. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) predicts that social forces shape behavior. For example, a compliment from a romantic partner about making healthy food choices at dinner may increase the likelihood of eating healthily at dinner next time.

Another theory specific to romantic partners also contributes to our understanding of the processes by which romantic partners can shape body image. Individuals care deeply about their romantic partners' opinions (perhaps more so than the opinions of anyone else), and because of shared emotional and physical intimacy, romantic partners can serve as a reference point for understanding our physical selves. Partner Comparison Theory (Markey & Markey, 2013) is predicated on these ideas. Specifically, this theory proposes that individuals form perceptions of themselves through social comparison with their romantic partners. That is, self-perceptions are formed as a result of comparing romantic partners' characteristics in relation to one's own. For example, having a romantic partner that is physically attractive and perceiving oneself as less physically attractive may create body image concerns. In sum, theories such as social learning and partner comparison may explain how romantic partners influence body image.

Although these processes may be important for all couples, partner comparison may be particularly relevant to same-sex couples. In comparison to heterosexual couples, same-sex couples (i.e., lesbian couples, gay couples) compare themselves to a partner that is physically more similar to them. Direct comparison to a range of partner attributes is more likely, and therefore, same-sex partners' influence on body image may be stronger than opposite-sex partners' influence. Women with same-sex partners may, for example, compare their hair, body shape, breast size, or legs to those same attributes in their female partners. Men with same-sex partners may compare their muscularity, hair, weight, or masculinity to those same traits in their male partners. As predicted by Partner Comparison Theory (Markey & Markey, 2013), individuals who feel that their same-sex partners are "better" than they are on various physical attributes may be at risk for body dissatisfaction.

### 1.2. Sexual orientation and body image

Although little is known about how relational processes shape gay and lesbian individuals' body image, there is a growing body of literature on sexual orientation and body image (e.g., Alvy, 2013; Frederick & Essayli, 2016). This research generally suggests that gay men are at greater risk for body image concerns and weight loss behaviors in comparison to heterosexual men (Bosley, 2011; Frederick & Essayli, 2016; Morrison, Morrison, & Sager, 2004; Peplau et al., 2009). Some have speculated that gay men are at greater risk for these problems because they are evaluated by potential male romantic partners, just as heterosexual women are (Bosley, 2011; Tiggemann, Martins, & Kirkbride, 2007). Men prefer physical attractiveness in a partner more than women do (Legenbauer et al., 2009), which may prompt self-monitoring and consequent feelings of distress from not meeting a perceived male partner's standards. In support of this contention, gay men are more likely to report objectification, surveillance, avoidance of sex due

to body dissatisfaction, dieting for weight loss, and are more likely to consider cosmetic surgery than heterosexual men (Frederick & Essayli, 2016). Weight may be a particularly important concern for gay men in the context of romantic relationships. More than 1/3 of gay men report experiencing antifat bias, which is most often rejection by a potential romantic partner because of weight. Gay men are also more likely than heterosexual or lesbian individuals to regulate their partner's eating behavior (Foster-Gimbel & Engeln, 2016; Markey, Markey, August, & Nave, 2016).

Research on lesbian women's body image is less conclusive. Some have speculated that lesbian culture may protect women from developing body image concerns (Huxley, Clarke, & Halliwell, 2014), although research only partially supports this idea. Some large scale studies show little to no differences between lesbian and heterosexual women on body image (Morrison et al., 2004; Peplau et al., 2009). Some research suggests that lesbian women do experience appearance related pressures and body dissatisfaction just as heterosexual women do (Huxley et al., 2014), and are no more critical of sociocultural norms surrounding women's appearance than are heterosexual women (Heffernan, 1999). However, other research shows that lesbian women have lower body dissatisfaction and a larger ideal body size than heterosexual women (Alvy, 2013; Markey & Markey, 2014; Polemni, Austin, & Kavanagh, 2009). Moving beyond group differences defined by sexual orientation, more research is needed to better understand how the context of romantic relationships may explain variability in gay men and lesbian women's body image.

### 1.3. Romantic relationships and body image

Research on the context of romantic relationships and their role in body image has largely focused on heterosexual couples. Romantic partners are shown to be critical influences on both heterosexual men's and women's body image (Goins, Markey, & Gillen, 2012; Goldsmith & Byers, 2016; Markey & Markey, 2006; Markey et al., 2004; Sheets & Ajmere, 2005), with individuals' perceptions of their partners' beliefs about their body being particularly important. Specifically, both men's and women's body satisfaction is associated with their perceptions of their partner's satisfaction with their body (Goins et al., 2012; Markey & Markey, 2006; Miller, 2001).

Less research has focused on the context of communication between heterosexual romantic partners about body-related issues. Although individuals tend to perceive their romantic partners as mostly positive influences on their health (Markey, Markey, & Gray, 2007), other research indicates that partners can attempt to exert pressure or control regarding eating and appearance. For example, in one study, almost 1/3 of individuals in exclusive relationships had told a partner or been told by a partner to alter their weight (Sheets & Ajmere, 2005), and many individuals attempt to control their romantic partner's eating behaviors, especially women (i.e., women exert control over men; Markey, Gomel, & Markey, 2008). Individuals who regulate their partner's eating tend to have heavier partners and to be more dissatisfied with these partners' bodies (Markey et al., 2008). Further, perceiving negative messages from partners about appearance is associated with shame and self-doubt, sexual dissatisfaction, disempowerment, and lifestyle changes (Goldsmith & Byers, 2016). Less perceived support from a partner is also associated with body dissatisfaction (Weller & Dziegielewski, 2004); and female partners' attempts to regulate their male partners' eating behavior is associated with men's weight concerns (Markey et al., 2008). Other research indicates that feedback from partners about appearance, even when positive, can have mixed outcomes. For example, women with negative self-views feel happier after imagining positive appearance feedback from a partner, yet also feel less understood (Brown, Stukas, & Evans, 2013).

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