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Photo By Sheryl Hagan-Booth

Body Beautiful?

BY CAROL CUMMINGS

FEMALE BODY IMAGE AND BARBIE. WE HAVE ALL HEARD ABOUT UNREALISTIC IDEALS FOR WOMEN’S BODIES AND HOW THOSE CAN AFFECT THEIR SELF-ESTEEM. BUT HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT ABOUT MALE BODY IMAGES AND G.I. JOE? RICK GRIEVE HAS.

Dr. Grieve, an associate professor of psychology and coordinator of the clinical psychology master’s program at Western Kentucky University, has expanded his research into traditional eating disorders to include eating disorders and muscle dysmorphia in males.

“Muscle dysmorphia relates to a distortion in perception,” Dr. Grieve said. “Big body builders might have a distortion in how they look at themselves. They may think they are too small, so they exercise to the exclusion of everything else, sometimes hiding their bodies or resorting to illegal supplements.”

According to Dr. Grieve, while women aspire to the thin ideal, the ideal for men is not to be thin — it is to be muscular. He has therefore conducted two research studies on the thin to muscular continuum.

“I first looked at what things contribute to male dysmorphia,” he explained. “I looked at lifting weights as a factor, as there are healthy and unhealthy patterns to body building. I also looked at healthy and unhealthy eating patterns.”

Dr. Grieve writes: “For years, body image studies have focused on women. However, it appears that men are becoming more and more concerned with body appearance. Muscle dysmorphia is a newly described disorder which affects mostly men, particularly those who engage in weight lifting or body building.”

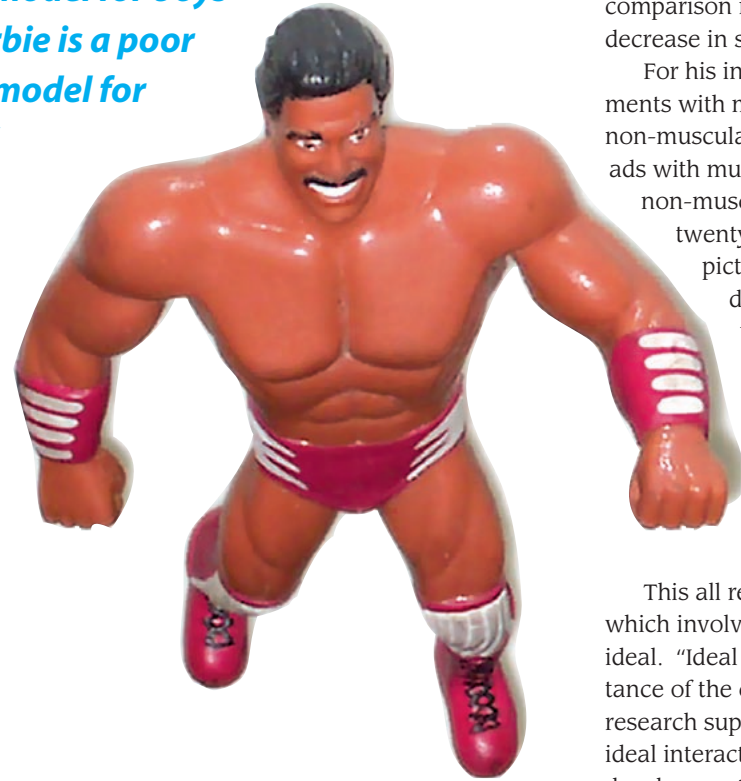
Individuals with muscle dysmorphia believe they are not muscular enough,



Dr. Rick Grieve researching muscle dysmorphia in males.

Photo By Sheryl Hagan-Booth

“Male action figures appear to be as poor a body model for boys as Barbie is a poor body model for girls.”



Dr. Grieve says, even though they are often more muscular than so-called “average people.” They hold a preoccupation with body shape that is persistent and causes impairment or distress.

Dr. Grieve said perceptions of the ideal male body have changed dramatically over the years. “G.I. Joe even looked normal years ago,” he said with a laugh. Now G.I. Joe has been transformed into a muscular, larger-than-life “he-man.” He writes: “Action figures, in particular, have undergone a transformation from being representations of normal-shaped men in the 1970s to having body shapes that are virtually unattainable by the majority of the population in the 2000s. Now, male action figures appear to be as poor a body model for boys as Barbie is a poor body model for girls.”

What Dr. Grieve found is that when an individual’s actual self falls short of his ideal self, he is more likely to develop unhealthy patterns. Other things he considered were external stressors, such as images of movie actors and *Playgirl* centerfolds. “Also, there has been a marked increase in naked or nearly naked men in advertising, particularly for products such as alcohol, cologne, and clothing,” he said.

The research looked at the effect such advertisements had on men. He writes: “Media advertisements generate social comparison. As the number of male bodies in advertisements increases, the opportunities for such a comparison increase. Social comparisons can lead to a decrease in satisfaction with current body shape.”

For his initial study, Dr. Grieve selected six advertisements with muscular men and six advertisements with non-muscular men. One group of men reviewed the ads with muscular men, and one reviewed the ads with non-muscular men. Participants were asked to rate twenty-five areas of their bodies and to rate the pictures. Questions included: How attractive do you think women find these men? Are they muscular? Are they healthy? Are they intelligent?

“The men who looked at the muscular pictures had a slight but significant increase in their own body dissatisfaction,” he said. “Men who looked at the non-muscular pictures had an insignificant increase.”

This all relates to the internalization of the ideal body, which involves an individual’s acceptance of the cultural ideal. “Ideal body internalization involves the acceptance of the cultural idea,” Dr. Grieve said. “Current research supports that the internalization of a thin body ideal interacts with other variables to contribute to the development of eating disorders in women. Body image is one of the primary factors influencing a person’s desire to lose or, in the case of muscle dysmorphia, gain weight.”

Dr. Grieve said women still bear the lion’s share of all eating disorders, with ninety percent of all individuals affected being female. “However, the number of males with these disorders is a phenomenon that is large enough to merit further study,” he said.

Dr. Grieve received his bachelor’s degree from Central Michigan University and his master’s and doctorate from the University of Memphis. He completed his pre-doctoral internship at the University of Mississippi and Jackson Veterans Affairs Medical Centers Consortium and a post-doctoral internship at Harriett Cohn Mental Health Center in Clarksville, Tenn. He has been a member of Western’s faculty since 2002. His other research interests include sport psychology (sport fans and optimism in sport), factors influencing weight loss and weight maintenance (group dynamics, role of hedonics, self-efficacy, eating beliefs, and social physique anxiety), decision-making (counterfactual production and jurors’ decisions), and anger management treatment issues.