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Body Weight Relationships in Early Marriage: Weight Relevance, Weight Comparisons, and Weight Talk

Caron F. Bove* and

Division of Nutritional Sciences, Cornell University

Jeffery Sobal

Division of Nutritional Sciences, Cornell University

Abstract

This investigation uncovered processes underlying the dynamics of body weight and body image among individuals involved in nascent heterosexual marital relationships in Upstate New York. In-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with 34 informants, 20 women and 14 men, just prior to marriage and again one year later were used to explore continuity and change in cognitive, affective, and behavioral factors relating to body weight and body image at the time of marriage, an important transition in the life course. Three major conceptual themes operated in the process of developing and enacting informants' body weight relationships with their partner: weight relevance, weight comparisons, and weight talk. Weight relevance encompassed the changing significance of weight during early marriage and included attracting and capturing a mate, relaxing about weight, living healthily, and concentrating on weight. Weight comparisons between partners involved weight relativism, weight competition, weight envy, and weight role models. Weight talk employed pragmatic talk, active and passive reassurance, and complaining and critiquing criticism. Concepts emerging from this investigation may be useful in designing future studies of and approaches to managing body weight in adulthood.

Keywords

Body image; Body weight; Marriage; Obesity; Qualitative; Romantic relationships; Social comparisons; Weight comparisons; Weight talk

A topic of popular culture and often a subject of humor, marital weight gain is commonly recognized as being emblematic of marriage. Longitudinal research supports this perception, reporting that entering marriage is associated with weight gain and exiting with weight loss (Eng, Kawachi, Fitzmaurice, & Rim, 2005; Lee, Cho, Grodstein, Kawachi, Hu, & Colditz, 2005; Sobal, Rauschenbach, & Frongillo, 2003). Recent analyses of cohabitation in prospective studies have found that cohabitation, like marriage, is associated with weight gain for both women and men (Averett, Sikora, & Argys, 2008; Burke, Beilin, Dunbar, & Kevan, 2004; The & Gordon-Larsen, 2009), although weight gain associated with cohabitation appears to be less than that of marriage (Averett et al., 2008).

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*Direct correspondence to Caron F. Bove, Division of Nutritional Sciences, MVR Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853, USA; cfbove@gmail.com.

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Understanding associations between marriage and body weight may be especially important given the rapid rise in obesity rates since the 1970s (Flegal, 2005) along with U.S. estimates that 35.5% of women and 32.2% of men are obese (Flegal, Carroll, Ogden, & Curtin, 2010). Although marriage is believed to positively affect health, marriage may also adversely affect health via weight gain (Averett et al., 2008), which increases the proportions of women and men classified as overweight and obese (Averett et al., 2008; The & Gordon-Larsen, 2009). Obesity is a health concern because of its associations with increased morbidity (Lean, 2000), mortality (Berrington de Gonzalez et al., 2010), healthcare costs (Daviglius et al., 2004), and social stigmatization (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). This study explores interrelationships between body weight and heterosexual romantic relationships at entry into marriage, an important life-course transition and a time of changing social roles when thoughts, feelings, and actions relating to weight and health could be expected to be in flux (Williams & Umberson, 2004).

Personal interest in body weight and weight loss most often relates to concerns about physical appearance and health. Women desiring weight loss most commonly hope to improve their appearance and future health, whereas men most often hope to improve their fitness and future health (Levy & Heaton, 1993; Striegel-Moore, Wilfley, Caldwell, Needham, & Brownell, 1996). Appearance plays a primary role in attracting desirable marital partners for both women and men seeking heterosexual romantic relationships (Cawley, Joyner, & Sobal, 2006).

Within the marriage market, “ideal” weights are gender specific. For women, physical attractiveness has become nearly synonymous with slenderness, while for men a trim but muscular physique is considered most attractive (Neighbors, Sobal, Liff, & Amiraian, 2008; Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985; Weeden & Sabini, 2005). Indeed, overweight and obese women are disadvantaged in the marriage market (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). Obese young women are less likely than thinner women to date (Sheets & Ajmere, 2005), and overweight and obese young women are less likely than underweight and normal-weight women to be married (Averett & Korenman, 1994). The pattern differs for young men, however, with heavier young men being *more* likely than underweight men to be wed (Averett & Korenman, 1994).

Marriage involves social role obligations, which may influence body weight through their effects on dietary intake (Bove, Sobal, & Rauschenbach, 2003). Newly cohabiting partners share kitchens and meals, which encourages them to eat more regular and more elaborate meals than they had done prior to their relationship, facilitates their snacking, involves their sharing meals with each other’s commensal circles, and often produces dietary convergence (Bove & Sobal, 2006; Bove et al., 2003; Craig & Truswell, 1994; Kemmer, Anderson, & Marshall, 1998; Marshall & Anderson, 2002; Sobal, Bove, & Rauschenbach, 2002). Dietary changes such as these may affect partners’ caloric intakes and body weights (Burke et al., 2004).

Thus, newly married spouses may be affected by two opposing influences: cultural appearance norms valuing slender or appropriately muscled bodies and social role norms relating to food. This research explored continuity and change in newlyweds’ thoughts, feelings, and actions relating to their own and their mate’s weights as they navigated potential clashes between cultural weight norms and marital role obligations during the transition into marriage. We examined how spouses perceived, as well as communicated with each other about, their own and their mate’s weights during early marriage. Our interest in how people conceptualize and address these issues in their daily lives at a time of social transition meant that a qualitative approach using a grounded theory strategy was useful for pursuing our aims (Morse, 1994).

The core theme emerging from our analysis was body weight relationships, which was embodied in the themes weight relevance, weight comparisons, and weight talk. Here we review literature about these areas.

Weight relevance involves interpretations of the significance of one's weight. Self-appraisals of body weight and physical appearance contribute to body image, a multi-dimensional construct involving people's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about, and behaviors relating to, their bodies (Grogan, 2006; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Involvement in romantic relationships appears to affect women's body image more than men's, with women viewing their bodies more positively when they perceive their partner is satisfied with their weight (Markey, Markey, & Birch, 2004; D. J. Miller, 2001). Both women and men commonly misjudge the opposite sex's weight and size preferences, however, which contributes to weight and body dissatisfaction. Women usually *underestimate* the female body size desired by men and men usually *overestimate* the male body size desired by women (Markey et al., 2004; Rozin & Fallon, 1988; Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson, 1995). One construct consistently found to contribute to weight dissatisfaction and body image is social comparison (Jones, 2001; Thompson et al., 1999).

Weight comparisons involve consideration of body weight relative to the weights of others. Social comparison theory suggests that people regularly compare their attributes and opinions with those of others as part of an innate, on-going process (Wood, 1989) that may occur "as an almost inevitable element of social interaction" (Brickman & Bulman, 1977, p. 150). People compare themselves to evaluate and improve themselves and to protect and enhance their self-esteem or self-evaluation (Wood, 1989). Upward comparison occurs when lower performing individuals compare themselves with higher performers, and downward comparison when higher performers compare themselves with lower performing others (Wood, 1989). Early theory proposed that comparison with individuals who were "similar" on the attribute of comparison would be most favored by individuals making comparisons, but later work identified the importance of shared social bonds and a sense of "closeness" between comparison individuals (Tesser, 1991; Wills & Suls, 1991; Wood, 1989). Thus, "particularistic" comparisons with individuals with whom one has a "meaningful social connection" (Wills & Suls, 1991, p. 397) may be especially significant because they contribute to feelings of self-worth, unlike more general "universalistic" comparisons (D. T. Miller, Turnbull, & McFarland, 1988; Wills & Suls, 1991; Wood, 1989).

Social comparisons about physical appearance influence body image development (Jones, 2001). Adolescents compare components of their physical appearance with same-sex peers and models, and the more frequently they compare their physical attributes, the more likely they are to feel dissatisfied with their bodies (Jones, 2001). Girls' and women's weight concerns and physical appearance comparisons typically focus on overweight, fatness, and a desire to be thinner, whereas boys' and men's focus on being too slender as well as too fat and emphasize muscularity (Fisher, Dunn, & Thompson, 2002; Grogan, 2006; Karazsia & Crowther, 2009). Physical appearance comparisons with peers contribute as much to body dissatisfaction as do those with idealized media images (Myers & Crowther, 2009). Although both women and men experience body dissatisfaction from physical appearance comparisons, this relationship is stronger for women than for men (Myers & Crowther, 2009).

Social comparisons with close others can be problematic if they involve attributes important to the comparer's self-esteem (Tesser, 1991; Wills & Suls, 1991). Thus, marital partners may try to limit social comparisons with each other to reduce the potential for negative feelings between mates (Brickman & Bulman, 1977). Daily interaction between spouses makes comparison likely, however (Pinkus, Lockwood, Schimmack, & Fournier, 2008).

One study of everyday social comparisons within married couples found that, on average, spouses compared themselves with each other daily; physical-appearance comparisons were infrequent, however, and were less common than comparisons relating to abilities, childcare/housework, careers, and social skills (Pinkus et al., 2008).

Weight talk involves conversations about weight and appearance that affect perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and actions pertaining to weight and body image. Indeed, adult and adolescent women's discussions about weight are often ritualized processes and fundamental components of female weight control (Hope, 1980). Nichter and Vuckovic (1994) coined the term "fat talk" to describe a form of weight discourse script common among white adolescent girls in the U.S. in which they express disappointment and other negative feelings by complaining "I'm so fat" to each other and then receive reassurance about their weight and other concerns (Nichter, 2000; Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994). Although verbalizing discontent with one's body may foster "group affiliation" and "group solidarity" (Nichter, 2000; Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994), participating in weight talk has been found to contribute to social comparison about weight and to body dissatisfaction among adolescent girls and college-aged women (Jones, 2004; Nichter, 2000; Wertheim, Paxton, Schutz, & Muir, 1997; Tucker, Martz, Curtin, & Bazzini, 2007).

Studies of weight talk within families typically focus on communication between parents and children and among siblings and often implicate teasing and criticism of weight and appearance in the development of body dissatisfaction, sometimes linking family weight talk with eating disorder pathology (Haworth-Hoepfner, 2000; Nichter, 2000; Neumark-Sztainer, Bauer, Friend, Hannan, Story, & Berge, 2010). Research about the role of romantic partners in body satisfaction/dissatisfaction has similarly emphasized negative forms of communication between partners (Befort, Kurpius, Hull-Blanks, Nicpon, Huser, & Sollenberger, 2001; Murray, Touyz, & Beumont, 1995; Ogden & Taylor, 2000; Sheets & Ajmone, 2005) and has only sparsely considered couples' discussions about weight more broadly. Indeed, despite romantic partners' significant potential to influence body image (Thompson et al., 1999), little is known about "the extent to which a romantic partner instills dissatisfaction (or satisfaction) where it previously did not exist, or simply reinforces existing satisfaction or dissatisfaction" (McLaren & Wardle, 2002, p. 186).

The present qualitative, grounded theory study addressed the under-examined topic of how romantic relationships contribute to continuity and change in thoughts, feelings, and actions relating to weight during the marital transition. Understanding cognitive and affective factors underlying weight-related behaviors may suggest opportunities for intervention to limit marriage-related weight gain and prevent the development of obesity.

Method

Thirty-four individuals (20 women and 14 men) about to marry or recently wed from a tri-county area of Upstate New York participated in this project. Informants were recruited through newspaper advertisements, word of mouth, and mail and telephone contacts to participate in a study about weight at entry into marriage. Recruitment continued until saturation appeared to have been reached and additional data were expected to provide few new insights (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Of the 20 female informants, 14 were partners of the 14 male informants and 6 were women whose partners declined to participate due to lack of interest or insufficient time. The project was approved by the University Institutional Review Board. All informants gave written informed consent and were identified by pseudonyms.

In-depth, semi-structured, audiotaped personal interviews were conducted. Informants were interviewed twice: first, soon after recruitment; second, about one year later. One author (CFB) conducted all interviews except for one conducted by the other author. Interviews occurred at informants' homes or workplaces, or the interviewer's office. Most informants were interviewed individually, but partners of some couples were interviewed jointly at both interviews (4 couples) or at second interviews (2 couples) to accommodate their busy schedules. Individual interviews lasted 1½ to 2 hours; couple interviews lasted 2 to 3 hours.

Interviews were organized using interview guides encouraging both conversational interviews and probing and follow-up of informants' accounts (Polkinghorne, 2005; Spradley, 1979). Interviews addressed informants' thoughts, feelings, and actions relating to their own and their partner's weights both prior to and during their relationship. For example, informants were asked whether and how marital commitment had changed their thoughts about their own and their partner's weights, and whether and how they and their partner talked about weight. Issues of unanticipated salience emerging during early interviews and analysis were queried in later interviews. Informants reported their weight (and the partner's weight if he was not participating) at both interviews and their height (and the partner's height) at first interviews.

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method, the primary analytic approach of grounded theory research (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and verified against the audiotapes by the interviewer. Textual data were broken into conceptual units and categories and compared and contrasted to identify similarities, differences, patterns, and themes in the data (Boeije, 2002). Multiple comparisons were performed: within individual informants, among female informants, among male informants, between female and male informants, between partners of individual couples, and across couples. Conducting two interviews with each informant a year apart permitted both cross-sectional and longitudinal comparisons, with the longitudinal analysis offering understanding of the marital transition as a dynamic process (Thomson & Holland, 2003). Data analysis continued throughout the writing of the manuscript as we continued to question and challenge our findings and compare and contrast them with prior literature.

Body mass indexes (BMI; weight in kilograms/height in meters²) were calculated using informants' reports of their own and their non-participating partner's weights and heights. We classified individuals' weights as *underweight* (BMI <18.5), *normal weight* (BMI 18.5–24.9), *overweight* (BMI 25.0–29.9), and *obese* (BMI ≥ 30.0) (World Health Organization, 1998).

Several techniques enhanced trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement contributed to the development of trust and rapport and improved data credibility. Second interviews filled in gaps and increased interviewer understanding (Polkinghorne, 2005). Member checks provided informants opportunities to clarify responses, correct interviewer misconceptions, and impart additional information. Multiple data sources (interview data, observational data, field notes, and interviews with spouses) contributed to the "richness, breadth, and depth" of our data (Morrow, 2005, p. 256). For the 14 couples in which both partners were interviewed, multiple partner data provided some validation of each informant's data (Boeije, 2002). Interview transcripts were read independently by the authors and then discussed together, with many meetings held to confer about the emerging analysis. This team approach led to new insights from the authors' discussions and guarded against overly simplistic or biased findings (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Informants were demographically heterogeneous except for ethnicity. All were white, and one man was of Puerto Rican ancestry. Informants were 20 to 75 years old, with most in their twenties or thirties. All had completed a high school diploma, about two thirds held two- or four-year college degrees, and a few held advanced degrees. All informants except for one retired individual were employed and represented a range of occupations, including schoolteacher, housecleaner, construction worker, graduate student, professor, store manager, bookkeeper, and nurse. Most informants had not been married previously. A few had children living outside the home (adult children from former marriages or a young child from a former relationship), and several had young children living within the home or regularly visiting overnight. Most informants cohabited before marriage, ranging in duration from 6 months to 6 years. At first interviews informants' self-reported weights were 110 to 255 pounds for women and 137 to 395 pounds for men, classifying them as underweight (0 women, 1 man), normal weight (13 women, 4 men), overweight (3 women, 8 men), and obese (4 women, 1 man). Informants' BMIs (calculated using first interview weights) are included in our findings.

Results

Within marital relationships, body weight was a multifaceted and dynamic topic eliciting extensive discussion during interviews. Salient themes emerging from our analysis were the core category body weight relationships and the key categories weight relevance, weight comparisons, and weight talk. Figure 1 summarizes our findings as a hierarchical display of the emergent categories and provides a map for reporting the results. Key categories are shown linked to their lower-order categories. Linkages between lower-order categories, described in the text, are not shown in the figure for the sake of clarity. Examples of categories are provided.

Weight Relevance

Whether or not, to what degree, and for what reasons informants considered body weight relevant varied among informants, often changed in concert with the change in marital status, and was important for understanding informants' approaches to weight, diet, and exercise.

Attracting and capturing a mate—As a central component of physical attractiveness, body weight had been relevant to most informants when they sought marital partners. Both female and male informants believed, however, that weight was more crucial for women's prospects in the marriage market than for men's and that, to some extent, weight worked in opposite ways for women and men seeking mates. Like several informants, Seth (BMI 24.5) directly contrasted overweight women's prospects with those of overweight men: "I think it's harder initially for a woman to meet someone when she's heavy. Harder than it is for a man." Although informants typically focused on *overweight* when discussing *weight's* relevance as an impediment to dating and courtship, a few—mostly men—addressed the opposite end of the weight spectrum. From personal experience these men perceived their own slenderness had made it more difficult to date and/or marry.

I was definitely very skinny and there were a lot of girls that I would have liked to have gone out with that were going after the football types. [Charles, BMI 21.1]

I'm going to say it [being slender] affects it a lot, because of my clan in college, everybody, we were all basically the same size as far as height. But they all had a larger frame, they were more solid. I am the last one to be getting married. ... So, I'm going to make a direct correlation to that. ... I think they do have an advantage as opposed to someone who is slight like myself. [Joe, BMI 17.7]

Given their internalization of current U.S. cultural mores that overweight women are not attractive to men, weight and body image had become extremely relevant to several women informants who had tried to be “skinny” during early adulthood when they hoped to find a mate. Kate (BMI 23.5) explained, “My biggest thing for a while is I wanted to get married, that was my mentality. I missed being in a relationship. ... and I was thinking, ‘Oh, I have to be thin so someone would be attracted to me.’”

Relaxing about weight—Once in committed romantic relationships, roughly one third of informants—women more than men—became less aware of their weight and less concerned about gaining weight or being overweight because weight and body image had become less relevant. Most women holding this perspective viewed their pre-marriage weight largely as a means to attract and “capture” a marital partner. Upon succeeding in the marriage market, these informants became less attentive to diet and exercise, believing that capturing a mate meant they could relax about their weight. Although they did not necessarily feel happier about their weight, they felt less motivated to work at it. Leah (BMI 20.8) expressed it this way, “You’ve got your man, pass the pie please.” Others said:

It [weight] doesn’t matter now that we’re married. Before, I thought it did. I just figure if you’re looking, you’ve got to look your best. ... now that I’m married, I don’t feel that it’s that important. [Sharon, BMI 36.6]

I’m probably a little more relaxed about it. I definitely would not have gone up a pant size three or four years ago. I think I would’ve worked it off.... I think part of it maybe has to do with Claudia [his partner]... I didn’t try at all. I thought about trying. I would’ve made more of an effort. [Seth, BMI 24.5]

When competing in the marriage market—a time when weight and appearance had been highly relevant—informants thought their appearance must appeal to any number of potential suitors. With commitment, however, they believed it necessary to appeal to one person only—their mate. As long as they received their mate’s approval, then weight and weight gain were less worrisome and less relevant than prior to their capturing a mate. Some informants, like Jessica (BMI 43.9), although desiring weight loss, now debated with themselves, believing on the one hand “I’ve got to lose weight” but tempering this with “he loves me the way I am so I’m not going to worry about it.” For Jessica, finding a partner who she believed was attracted to her large size meant that losing weight solely for reasons of appearance no longer was relevant and no longer provided motivation for weight loss:

Matt, he wants somebody that’s got some weight on them. ... But society has played such a big part in people. And I think that’s my main thing, “Oh, I have to look this way.” And then I think about, “For whom? I don’t have, why do I have to look this way? He doesn’t want me thin.” I mean he doesn’t mind me losing weight but he doesn’t want me being 90 pounds either. [Jessica, BMI 43.9]

Growing “comfortable” with one’s own weight and appearance within a relationship meant both that prior concerns about weight as an obstacle to marriage no longer were relevant and also that weight gain within the relationship was acceptable. Weight loss became optional rather than mandatory.

You get comfortable with your weight; he tells you you’re not fat. You can gain 15 pounds and he doesn’t tell you anything. Or he doesn’t care or it doesn’t bother him. ... you don’t have to go look good for other people as long as your boyfriend/husband thinks you look nice, it doesn’t matter. So when you go, “Oh, I want some ice cream,” you go get it. [Marie, BMI 24.1]

For women, decreasing weight relevance and weight consciousness were most common among individuals for whom weight had been a trying experience. All women who became

less attentive to their weight had prior concerns about overweight, either long- or short-term, in the past or in the present. For example, Jessica (BMI 43.9) had been overweight her entire life; Joanne (BMI 22.4) had been overweight in adolescence but then lost weight, vowing never to be heavy again; Audrey (BMI 21.3) periodically became distressed about the weight she gained during bouts of emotional eating. For men, however, decreasing weight consciousness was unrelated to prior concern about overweight. For Joe (BMI 17.7) it meant feeling less unhappy about being *underweight*.

Relaxing about weight typically began soon after relationship commitment and thus usually preceded the wedding. As soon as concern about weight became less relevant, weight gain followed, as was described by all nine women and two of three men who relaxed about weight during cohabitation and/or early marriage (the exception, Joe (BMI 17.7), did not gain weight during his first year of marriage and cohabitation). Speaking about herself and her friends, Audrey (BMI 21.3) observed, “Everyone seemed to maintain until they got engaged and then everyone seemed to kind of fall apart.” Kim (BMI 35.8) awaited the “legal obligation” of a marriage license before completely relaxing about her weight:

Before I worried a lot more about it [weight] than I do now ‘cause I figure he has an obligation now to be at the breakfast table (laughs). ... he has a legal obligation. But, I know that definitely doesn’t stop divorces happening but at the same time I kind of feel more of a leniency as far as whether my weight goes up or down or stays the same....

Although almost half of women informants became less aware of their weight once wed, several of them began paying more attention to hair, makeup, and dressing to project a “grown-up” look. Whereas weight had become less relevant to physical appearance, these other aspects of appearance now played important roles in women’s presentation of themselves.

Living healthily—Whereas prior to marriage cultural norms prescribed that extremely overweight or obese women feel dissatisfied with their appearance and believe it necessary to lose weight to attract a mate, with marriage weight lost relevance as a matter of appearance and gained significance as a component of health. Weight as health was a more nebulous and less pressure-laden target to aim for than was weight as appearance, i.e., a healthier lifestyle was a process that could be discussed and embarked upon sometime rather than a specific weight measurement to be achieved. Some informants were especially happy with the shift in focus away from weight loss to please a partner—which they associated with appearance-driven weight loss—to weight loss to improve oneself, which they perceived to be the case when losing weight for the betterment of health. Jessica (BMI 43.9) expressed her changed perspective this way:

There’s just that word “marriage” and it just seems like it’s more permanent. ... I guess I think we’re going to be together forever now. So if I want to be with him for the next 50, 60 years, I’ve got to start eating properly, start taking care of myself, or I’m not going to be here.

The sole man who, with marriage, began to focus on weight as health differed from the women adopting this perspective. Whereas married women relaxed about weight as they became less concerned about appearance and more focused on health, Matt (BMI 57.0)—although he too now worried less about his appearance—became *more* attentive to his weight when he focused on his health. Matt had felt pessimistic about his future, believing his obesity would prevent him ever from finding a mate, but success in the marriage market had changed his view and encouraged him to work on his weight. Matt explained, “The need to lose weight is more because of my health, wanting to live longer, [as] opposed to making myself look better for her. ... I’m doing it for health reasons.”

Once married, a few other informants, rather than completely abandon appearance for health, instead relaxed a bit about appearance and emphasized health a bit more, adopting lifetime rather than one-time approaches to weight and weight loss. Bill (BMI 28.7) faced the prospect of parenthood soon after marrying, which made his family health history seem especially relevant as a reason to prioritize health. In the past Leah (BMI 20.8) had been bulimic and Audrey (BMI 21.3) had contemplated purging as a means to rapid weight loss, but as married women they focused instead on pursuing their weight goals healthfully, emphasizing healthy lifestyles over pounds lost. Audrey observed, “I used to look at it as a weight and now I look at it as, in terms of being healthy. ... 120 [pounds] is kind of a goal but it’s, staying where I am is fine now because I feel good.”

Concentrating on weight—The concentrating-on-weight category encompassed several conditions sharing a common theme: weight was relevant to physical appearance, body image, and health, regardless of marital status. Unlike the relaxing-about-weight orientation, which appeared to contribute to weight gain, the concentrating-on-weight perspectives were associated with weight maintenance or, for most of those who gained weight during courtship or the early weeks of marriage, with weight loss.

The concentrating-on-weight orientation included informants who sought “to impress” their partner by remaining attentive to their weight despite their newlywed status. Joseph (BMI 20.3), the oldest and one of the most slender of the male informants, expressed this perspective most clearly: “I would say my philosophy is that I intend to try to impress Yvonne the rest of my life, even though I’m married to her. ... I believe strongly that relationships are based on the fact that you always think you’re dating this person.” For these informants, managing one’s weight was a prerequisite to feeling good about oneself and relating well to one’s mate, and weight maintenance was seen as more than just a route to matrimony. Karl (BMI 27.4), an athlete, said, “I still want to look good for her I still want to keep my physique and everything else up for her. And for myself ... you still want to do it for yourself, but I want to look good for her.”

The concentrating-on-weight orientation also included informants who, because of new marital social role obligations relating to commensality—i.e., eating with other individuals—became more attentive to weight simply to maintain their weight at, or return it to, pre-courtship levels. For some, especially those who were both newlywed and newly cohabiting, this occurred because informants were faced with their new partner’s eating habits and food preferences, which tested informants’ approaches to weight management. Yvonne (BMI 22.5) explained, “You have to watch it [weight] more. ... it’s a balancing act more because there’s more opportunities to eat really rich foods when you go out [as a couple]. So, watch lunches [when eating alone] a bit more.” For others, primarily men who married women who had resided locally with parents, weight gain during courtship was attributed to their eating meals prepared by their future in-laws who, in demonstrating their hospitality, “pushed the food” on them:

Every time I’d go to her house there’d be huge meals in front of me. ... the three of them were there and when they got ahold of me it was like, “Come on!” Big, big meals. [Keith, BMI 25.4]

Better food too ‘cause it wasn’t take-out, it was a lot better food. There was more too ‘cause I was definitely encouraged to eat there. [Bill, BMI 28.7]

Dissatisfied with their changing body image, these men began to focus on weight following the honeymoon period of courtship and early marriage, once they had “settled” into their new spousal role and felt ready once again to make weight relevant in their lives.

Weight Comparisons

Changes in weight relevance during the marital transition occurred in part because of changes in informants' social comparisons about weight. As romantic partners spent less time with friends and relatives and more time nurturing their relationship together, they became important weight references for each other.

Weight relativism—Informants assessed their own and their partner's weights according to both external sociocultural norms and each other's weight and size. Comparisons with external standards involved comparisons with other same-sex individuals as well as comparisons with the relative weights and sizes of other heterosexual couples. Thus, involvement in a romantic relationship meant that one's own weight could become a more relative concept involving not only weight and size comparisons with same-sex others but also weight and size comparisons with other heterosexual couples and, as a result, with one's partner.

Informants perceived and interpreted women's and men's weights differently. Women typically saw their weight in a manner comparable to current health-based weight categorization systems, except for women who would be considered obese by medical professionals who described themselves as "overweight" or "heavy" instead. In contrast, men and women usually perceived men's weights and sizes throughout the weight spectrum as smaller than they would be classified by health-based systems. Indeed, women more often than men considered men at the upper end of the normal-weight range to be "slender" or "skinny" and those in the overweight range, especially if they were muscular, to be normal weight. Men whose weight was at the low end of the normal-weight medical category typically perceived themselves—as did their partners—as very slender, even at sizes that would have been considered normal weight for women.

Thus within couples, weight and size norms were gender specific as well as gender relative, with both male and female informants typically preferring men to be heavier and/or to have better-defined muscles than their mate, and women expecting—although not necessarily expected—to weigh less and appear more slender than their mate. Indeed, some women felt uncomfortable in relationships in which they were as heavy as or heavier than their partner, presumably because their relative weight and size were incongruent with dominant Western cultural ideals for weight pairing. For example, Yvonne's (BMI 22.5) weight was well within the normal-weight range, but her new husband's weight differed little from her own (and his greater height meant that he was more slender than she was). This troubled Yvonne: "It bothers me a little bit that our weight is that close to each other. It's like, men are supposed to be heavier. And why am I so close to him?" In a joint interview Marie (BMI 24.1) and Jim (BMI 19.0) described how his slenderness had deterred her from dating him. Although Marie was of normal weight, Jim's relative slenderness had meant he was "too skinny" for her comfort:

Marie: When I first met Jim I was like, "He's too skinny." We used to say he needed to eat some groceries. I don't think that him being skinny attracted me to him. ...

Jim: Yeah, it took me three months to talk her into it [dating him].

Marie: ... at first it was hard for me to go out with someone so skinny. ... [a woman] might like him but she's not going to go out with him because she feels fat with him. Women like to be with a big huge burly man that makes her look as big as his thumb and that can pick her up and carry her around.

Beyond the dating period of the relationship, women typically did not discourage, and some women actively encouraged, weight gain by their normal-weight male partners. Encouragement of men's weight gain was most common among women whose weights were similar to or greater than their partner's and who continued to perceive their men as too slender and to wish they were heavier. Kim (BMI 35.8) thought her fiancé Fred (BMI 28.6) had been "too thin" when they first met and that he looked "healthier" after he gained 30 pounds (which had moved his weight into the overweight range and meant he now weighed more than she did). However, unlike women who viewed their partners' weight gains favorably, men who previously had not considered themselves too slender now expressed disappointment in their weight gain. Thus, unlike Kim who thought he looked "great" heavier, Fred regretted his weight gain: "I had a vision of myself being skinnier than what I am now, I guess more muscular." Similarly, whereas Beth (BMI 20.8) said about her new husband Keith's (BMI 25.4) weight, "He's gained ten pounds since we started dating. But he needed to 'cause I think he was too thin," Keith complained about his weight gain: "I perceive myself as starting to get the middle-age look of the roll around the belly. I don't like it at all."

Weight comparisons within romantic couples had psychological consequences for the partners that included rivalry, resentment, and inspiration, which manifested in weight comparison categories we labeled weight competition, weight envy, and weight role models.

Weight competition—Accompanying relationship-based changes in the targets of some informants' weight comparisons were changes in the sense of competitiveness some felt about their weight and appearance. Before their involvement in committed romantic relationships, some informants had looked to same-sex friends for guidance about appearance and weight, following friends' leads as they sought a competitive edge in the marriage market. Joanne (BMI 22.4) recalled:

I had a friend ... her concentration was on clothes and styles and stuff like that. So when you're with somebody like that, you're going to be more apt to watch what you're eating and stuff like that because you're going to want to stay, not in competition with this person but you're going to want to be ... I mean she was dark and small and petite and I'm a bigger person so I had to be more careful of how I looked with her because I was so much taller than she was.

Once engaged and/or cohabiting, vying with friends about weight became less relevant. However, a few informants began to compete with their partner about weight. Only women alluded to this and the few who did had partners who, after gaining weight early in their relationships, later demonstrated determined approaches to weight loss that provoked disagreeable feelings in the women. These men complained about their weight gains and rejoiced about their weight losses. They weighed themselves frequently and involved their wives in their weight monitoring. Beth (BMI 20.8) explained: "We do that all the time. I don't get on [the scale], he gets on. And he usually asks, 'Guess my weight!'" Dirk's (BMI 28.0) "obsession" with his weight prompted Christina (BMI 23.5) to "obsess" about her own weight and to weigh herself daily: "That is another big issue. I had to ask Dirk to stop telling me what he weighed every day, before and after his workout. I obsessed about it...." Christina continued: "There was a sense of, not that he tried to push it on me, but I felt a sense of competition like I should lose more weight too." Bill's (BMI 28.7) focus on weight loss and muscle building occurred at a time when Kate (BMI 23.5)—despite having wanted to lose weight for some time—did not diet because she was pregnant. This prompted Kate to resent Bill's weight loss and to consider undermining his progress: "I try to like, 'No, don't go down there [to the gym], you don't need to do that,' 'cause then I feel like, 'Oh, it makes me look worse,' you know? I'm more of a saboteur towards it" Thus, weight competition could include an element of envy over a partner's weight loss.

Weight envy—Most female informants felt uncomfortable being similar in weight to or heavier than their mate, regardless of either partner's actual weight. Women's discomfort ranged from being "a little bothered" to feeling "jealous" of their partner. One man's relative slenderness served as a "constant reminder" to his wife that she was overweight. Women who perceived their partner weighed little or gained little weight relative to the large amounts of food they saw him eat experienced envy especially keenly. Unlike their partners, women experiencing what we label weight envy typically complained that they gained weight easily, often despite efforts not to. Husbands of weight-envious women were perceived to have been fortunate in their genetic inheritance. Saying she felt "envious That he is just able to eat whatever whenever and not gain an ounce," Leah (BMI 20.8) expressed weight-envious women's sentiments most succinctly.

Although nearly all weight-envious individuals were women and weight-envied were men, one man, Joe (BMI 17.7), envied his wife's apparent ability to *gain* weight easily: "She doesn't know this, but I guess in a way I'm somewhat jealous because somehow she was able to gain it [weight] whereas I can't." Indeed, couples whose partners had these opposing weight and body image concerns, i.e., the woman believed herself too heavy and desired weight loss and the man felt too thin and hoped to gain muscle mass, felt especially challenged by their body weight relationships.

Weight envy contributed to couples' conflicts about food, weight, and health. Once cohabiting, regardless of their marital status, several women found it more difficult to maintain or lose weight because they now shared homes and kitchens with men who (a) believed they could eat "anything" and "everything" simply because they were slender; (b) ate snacks before and/or after dinner, which facilitated women's snacking; (c) ate a narrower variety of foods than the women, which constricted women's choices; and/or (d) were reluctant to cook, which meant the women had to prepare meals the men would eat, often prioritizing the men's food preferences over their own. Yvonne (BMI 22.5) described her dilemma this way: "It's like, how am I going to get enough into him and not too much into me? So that's where I sort of see the balancing act." In the absence of weight envy, food and weight less often were sources of conflict for couples. Anna (BMI 18.8) addressed this when she explained how her husband Charles's (BMI 21.1) weight influenced her thoughts about her own weight: "We meld really well together. We have very similar body types and it all fits together perfectly. We love the same sorts of foods. And we respond to food in similar ways: neither one of us puts on weight much."

For women who were overweight or obese, envying a partner's weight did not usually motivate changes in their own weight-related behaviors. Attributing their mate's weight to genes or good fortune—neither of which was under personal control—rather than to diet and/or exercise, these women sometimes were oblivious to their partner's healthful behaviors. Furthermore, weight-envied men's dietary behaviors—as perceived by their weight-envious wives—often were not those recommended for weight maintenance and good health. That weight-envied partners were not regarded as examples to be emulated contrasted with the respect shown to partners serving as positive weight role models.

Weight role models—The weight-related behaviors modeled by partners, as well as the attitudes toward physical attractiveness and health these behaviors implied, contributed to changes in some informants' own weight-oriented thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Positive weight role models prompted their partner to be mindful about weight. As with weight envy, positive weight role models arose from weight comparisons between partners in which one was perceived by the other to have the relatively better weight (i.e., the weight that was more consistent with gender weight norms). However, unlike the situation most

characteristic of weight envy in which male partners were resented for their seemingly effortless achievement of comparatively slender weights, positive weight role models were admired for their weight and respected for the effort they expended in managing it. By demonstrating that healthy and attractive weights were achievable, positive weight role models inspired their partner to be attentive to his or her own weight. From hearing her husband, Keith (BMI 25.4), complain about his weight gain, observing him engage in outdoor recreation, and learning that he desired meal changes to increase his vegetable consumption and lower his fat and calorie intakes, Beth (BMI 20.8) realized that weight, physical fitness, and eating healthfully were important to him, which motivated her to improve her own fitness and maintain her weight. For couples like Audrey (BMI 21.3) and Karl (BMI 27.4), the positive weight role model process was continuous and reciprocal, with each partner serving as both positive role model and observer:

Karl started working out all the time and looking better and better. And I wasn't [working out] at all. And so I kind of, not necessarily got scared but then I'd look at how much better he's looking and thought, "I really can't stay this way. If he's going to look better, I've got to, I shouldn't just kind of sit around." [Audrey]

I know she's working really hard [at exercise and her weight] and I don't want to come home and not look good to her. I mean you still want to look attractive for each other, I think. [Karl]

Thus, a mate's attentiveness to his or her own weight and appearance increased some informants' interest in their own weight by making weight more relevant and by inspiring them to concentrate on their weight.

A second form of weight role model occurred among couples in which one partner weighed relatively more than the other, but, in contrast to the positive weight role model scenario, in this second form the modeling partner was overweight and/or perceived by the mate to be lenient about weight. This form of weight role model fostered a relaxed attitude about weight that probably contributed to the lesser-weighting mate's gaining weight. Seth (BMI 24.5) disclosed how Claudia's (BMI 25.6) seemingly relaxed weight orientation and relatively larger size had contributed to his becoming complacent about his own weight:

She's a little bit overweight so it's sort of, I'm not as concerned what she's going to think because I just know she's not [going to think about his weight]. If she were in super great shape and was going to give me a hard time, that might influence it [his weight]. Because she doesn't and because it doesn't matter to her ... I sort of am relaxed about it. [Seth, BMI 24.5]

Weight Talk

Weight talk refers to the ways that partners explicitly and implicitly communicated their thoughts and feelings about their own and/or their mate's weight with each other. Weight talk contributed to marriage-related changes in weight relevance and influenced partners' weight comparisons. Couples' weight talk was influenced by partners' weights and relative weights and by partners' concerns about their own and their mate's weights. Weight talk varied in terms of which partner's weight was emphasized, what was said, which partner(s) said it, and the effects the talk had on both the listener and the speaker. For some couples, one partner's weight, and thus one pattern of weight talk, dominated discussions; for others, one pattern of weight talk was used to address one partner's weight and either the same pattern or another to address the other's weight. Some couples' weight talk evolved over time as partners modified their weight goals and behaviors and as they came to understand their mate's perspectives about weight. Several patterns of weight talk predominated: pragmatic talk, active and tacit reassurance, and complaining and critiquing criticism.

Pragmatic talk—Pragmatic weight talk was matter-of-fact and shared by both partners. Conversations about weight typically emphasized health, but appearance also was mentioned. Pragmatic talkers included, but were not limited to, the oldest informants in the study. Pragmatic talkers usually were attentive to their weight, which was in or near the normal range, noting small changes and regularly instituting small adjustments to prevent weight gain (or excessive loss) or to return weight to a desired range when it temporarily strayed. After Arthur (BMI 26.4) gained five pounds he and Mary (BMI 20.7) discussed and “watched” his diet and his weight. Rose (BMI 20.7) and Steve (BMI 26.1) shared similar perspectives about food and health and concurred about weight: “We were saying it’s time to cut back on the sweets that have crept in and get a handle on it [their weights] again” [Rose]. Partners watched each other step on the scale or told each other their weight during conversations about weight; they identified and discussed, or assumed they could discuss, obstacles to weight maintenance. From partners’ comments women perceived their husbands liked their weight and found them attractive, which further motivated them to maintain their weight. Overall, pragmatic weight talkers were practical about weight, viewing and discussing it as straightforward and controllable.

Active reassurance—Couples for whom active reassurance was the primary pattern of weight talk focused on weight from an appearance perspective, with one or both partners overtly affirming their mate’s weight and appearance. When partners expressed concern that they were too heavy and thus were unattractive, their mate reassured them that their weight and appearance were fine. Compliments helped to instill confidence that one’s weight met with one’s partner’s approval: “He might say, ‘I think I’m looking heavier.’ And I’ll say, ‘No you don’t, you’re being silly.’ We don’t say, ‘You really should lose weight,’ ‘cause that’s just rude. We try to compliment each other” [Kim, BMI 35.8]. When men expressed disappointment and frustration over their slenderness, a different kind of reassurance occurred: female partners verbalized agreement that their mate was indeed slender, which seemed to reassure men by legitimizing their concerns about underweight.

Although psychologically and relationally valuable, reassurance and compliments lowered motivation for weight loss among informants complaining of overweight or weight gain, despite their desire to be thinner. Hearing that her partner found her “perfect” helped Kim (BMI 35.8) not only to feel secure in her relationship but also to feel less in need of weight loss. Similarly, hearing her partner say that she appeared to have lost weight lessened Jessica’s (BMI 43.9) resolve to work at her weight. Indeed, Jessica’s husband Matt (BMI 57.0) revealed in a separate interview that he misrepresented his perception of her weight to reassure her: “She’s always saying she’s fat and I tell her no, she’s not. I always tell her she looks like she’s losing weight.” Thus for some informants, hearing a partner’s reassurances about weight made their weight less relevant, which contributed to their relaxing about weight and probably to their gaining weight with marriage.

Tacit reassurance—Body weight was little discussed by couples relying on tacit reassurance. Although some would have preferred to weigh less, informants using tacit reassurance considered their appearance acceptable and rarely complained or sought reassurance about their weight from their mate. Likewise, partners did not complain about their mate’s weight and uncommented upon weight gain was presumed to be acceptable to the mate. Joanne (BMI 22.4) said of her partner, “I don’t think he has a problem [with her weight], I don’t know. I never, we don’t ever ask! That’s not something that’s critical to our conversations.” Tacit reassurance, like active reassurance, contributed to some informants feeling relaxed about their weight, which lessened their motivation to maintain their weight or to lose weight gained during the relationship. However, women whose weight and size were the same as or greater than their partner’s experienced weight envy nonetheless, which

suggests they were sensitive about their own size relative to their partner's despite the absence of overt marital weight talk.

Complaining criticism—In complaining criticism one partner (the complainer) was deeply disappointed with and critical of his or her *own* weight and weight gain and complained about it incessantly to the mate (the listener), focusing upon weight as an appearance issue. Complainers typically were male and listeners female. Dirk (BMI 28.0) disclosed, “I’ve whined and moaned to Christina (BMI 23.5) a lot about it [his weight].” Beth (BMI 20.8) recounted Keith’s (BMI 25.4) complaining: “He would be really unhappy with himself if he ever put on very much weight. I mean he’s driving me crazy now and all he put on was 10 pounds and he was skinny before.” Like complainers, listeners were interested in weight, physical fitness, diet, and appearance, but they dwelled less on their own weight when talking with their mate. Over time as male complainers concentrated on losing weight, they enthusiastically shared their weight-loss success with their fiancées and wives, which was regarded by the mates as contributing to a competitive atmosphere regarding weight. Notably, complainers all had normal-weight partners, which might have allowed them to feel no duty to avoid weight as a topic of conversation and to feel comfortable expressing disappointment in their weight gain and pleasure in their weight loss.

Both complaining criticism and active reassurance involved partners complaining about their weight, but two characteristics differentiated between these patterns. First, whereas the complainers of complaining criticism could not be placated about their marital weight gains, the complainers of active reassurance—upon feeling reassured about their appearance—usually lost motivation for weight change. Second, whereas with complaining criticism both complainers and listeners typically were interested in weight, diet, and exercise, this was not the case for couples using active reassurance in which one or both partners lacked interest in healthful eating and exercise. Indeed, some complaining weight talk listeners served as positive weight role models whose own attentiveness to diet, exercise, and weight inspired their complaining spouses to do the same.

Critiquing criticism—Whereas the focus of complaining criticism was one’s own weight, the focus of critiquing criticism was one’s partner’s weight. Among all couples using critiquing criticism, the man—dissatisfied with the woman’s weight gain during their relationship—spoke often to her about her weight and suggested how she should approach weight loss. Sometimes a wife’s weight was “a daily topic”; at other times the talk was subtle, like inquiries about health club memberships or non-verbal behaviors—e.g., a ““Do you really need that?” type of look” whenever one woman ate dessert. Joe (BMI 17.7) used props to remind Helen (BMI 25.9) about how she used to look.

Every now and then he’ll bring out a picture of somebody in a magazine, which I did look like, and he’ll say, “Who does that remind you of?” ... I’m guessing all these people and I had no clue and he goes, “This is what you used to look like.”
[Helen]

Critiquing criticism was always poorly received. Sharon (BMI 36.6) said, “I give it a deaf ear,” because she considered her husband—who, like herself, was obese—to be hypocritical in his “nagging” and “harping.” Helen (BMI 25.9) described how Joe’s (BMI 17.7) complaints about her weight gain culminated in “a knock-out, drag-out fight.” Moreover, Helen suspected that Joe’s pestering caused her to focus on her weight all the more, which had a paradoxical effect on her eating: “I think it was the more depressed I got and the more I thought about it the more I ate ‘cause I was thinking, ‘Don’t eat.’”

Critiquing criticism was the form of weight talk least often described by informants, depicted by only three women who were unhappy with their partners' attitudes toward their weight. Although we interviewed the partners of two of these women, albeit separately from their wives, the men did not represent themselves as harshly as their wives did regarding their weight talk. The women describing critiquing criticism were all larger than their husbands, meaning that cultural norms for heterosexual weight relativism were not met, and two of the three experienced weight envy. When considered together, these findings suggest that these couples' body weight relationships were especially contentious.

Discussion

Our inquiry explored intersections between the transition into marriage and women's and men's perceptions of and experiences with body weight. Body weight was embedded in informants' romantic/marital relationships, encompassing weight relevance, weight comparisons, and weight talk. By examining body weight dynamics longitudinally as well as cross-sectionally, our study provides a window into a little-studied process in the psychosocial interior of relationships (Handel & Whitchurch, 1994) at an important transition in the life course.

Consistent with prior research, informants considered their weight relevant when they sought to attract marital partners (Sobal, 2005). Whereas informants uniformly expected that overweight would undermine women's marital prospects more than men's, slender male informants perceived their own weight had been a disadvantage in the marriage market. Survey research supports slender men's perspectives, finding both that slim men, unlike slim women, tend to perceive themselves as unattractive (Frederick, Peplau, & Lever, 2006) and also that women rate non-muscular slender men as less attractive than men with moderate levels of muscularity (Frederick & Haselton, 2007).

Once involved in committed relationships, about half of our female informants relaxed about their weight and described gaining weight once they relaxed. Relaxing about weight probably contributes to weight gain associated with cohabitation and marriage, especially for women, that has consistently been identified in prior research (Averett et al., 2008; Burke et al., 2004; Eng et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2005; Sobal et al., 2003; The & Gordon-Larsen, 2009). It was precisely because weight relaxation and gain sometimes preceded marriage that some female informants desired to lose weight to present their most "perfect" selves at their weddings (Neighbors & Sobal, 2008; Sobal, Bove, & Rauschenbach, 1999). Women's relaxing about weight once they had "captured" a mate is consistent with a marriage market hypothesis of weight gain in marriage (Averett et al., 2008).

Male romantic partners appeared to play a central role in women's relaxing about weight with marriage. Over three quarters of our female informants perceived their partner was satisfied with their mate's weight and appearance, which made weight less relevant for many women and may have reduced women's "appearance-contingent self-worth" (Strahan, Lafrance, Wilson, Ethier, Spencer, & Zanna, 2008), which together lessened women's insecurities about their bodies, and—among those who would have preferred to weigh less—their motivation for weight loss almost regardless of women's weights. Our findings are consistent with those of Stuart and Jacobson (1989) who reported that when a woman married she stopped trying to maintain her weight because she felt "secure in her husband's acceptance," which granted her "a license to relax" (p. 25), as well as with those of other researchers (Markey et al., 2004; D. J. Miller, 2001) who found that the more satisfied a woman perceived her romantic partner to be with her weight, the more satisfied the woman was with her weight.

In contrast to the situation for women, few men described relaxing about and then gaining weight with marriage. The different pattern for men may be explained by research finding that men's body image and esteem are less closely intertwined with their romantic relationships than are women's (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007), thus men may be less inclined than women to relax about weight in response to their partner's reassurances about weight. Male informants more commonly attributed weight gain to changes in social practices associated with courtship, cohabitation, and early marriage, particularly to dietary changes relating to commensality—i.e., sharing meals with partners and new extended families—and to marital partners' dietary convergence (Bove et al., 2003; Craig & Truswell, 1994; Kemmer et al., 1998; Marshall & Anderson, 2002; Sobal et al., 2002), which supports a social obligation hypothesis of marital weight gain (Averett et al., 2008).

With marriage, some informants' appearance- versus health-focused weight orientations changed, with appearance becoming less important and health taking on more significance. Our findings are consistent with those of Backett and Davison's (1995) qualitative study, which found that people's motivations for enacting health-related behaviors changed from appearance driven for singles to health conscious for the married shouldering responsibilities of mates, mortgages, and children. Indeed, it was partly because entry into marriage coincided with their moving to larger homes with improved kitchens facilitating cooking that some of our informants became interested in more healthful diets and weights (Bove & Sobal, 2006). However, given that increased health consciousness occurred among overweight and obese women informants who also spoke of relaxing about—rather than of becoming more attentive to—their weight with marriage, we concur with Backett and Davison (1995) that “this consciousness of health could change without any concomitant effect of behaviour” (p. 635).

The concentrating-on-weight perspectives involved continuing or increased attentiveness to weight and appearance after marrying. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) described a form of this orientation in their study of U.S. couples, noting that although heterosexual partners anticipated and hoped their physical appearance would become less important to their mate once they wed, this change often did not occur and most felt obligated to continue working on their appearance after they married to please their partner. Although others (e.g., Sheets & Ajmere, 2005) have suggested that women feel more compelled than men to maintain their shape after finding a mate, this was not the case among our informants given that men were less inclined than women to relax about weight once wed. In addition, some informants became more focused on their weight to counter the tendency for weight gain that accompanied dietary changes associated with spousal commensal obligations (Bove et al., 2003; Sobal et al., 2002).

We found that romantic partners became weight references for each other, revealing the important role of weight comparison in intimate social contexts as well as demonstrating how these comparisons affect weight evaluation and weight management (Neighbors et al., 2008; Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson, 1995). Although other researchers have suggested that “only same-sex others are viewed as appropriate targets of comparison” for physical attractiveness (Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992, p. 719) and that physical appearance comparisons between heterosexual spouses are uncommon (Pinkus et al., 2008), we found that opposite-sex romantic partners were influential targets for social comparison about body weight. We suspect that whereas weight comparisons with same-sex peers and sociocultural norms would have been most relevant when informants competed in the marriage market, the new social context of marriage might have affected the salience of potential weight comparison targets (Strahan, Wilson, Cressman, & Buote, 2006), making marital partners relevant targets for some informants' weight comparisons. Our study's use of inductive qualitative research methods might have been crucial in allowing the “texture of

social comparison to emerge freely” (Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985, p. 1182) from naturalistic, real-life comparisons (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992).

Thus, weight relativism involved judging and perceiving body weight not solely as a reading on a scale but also as a measure relative to one’s partner’s weight and size. Women informants desired to be smaller than their mate to be consistent with dominant Western norms for heterosexual couples. These norms contribute to mating practices in which women seek men larger and men seek women smaller than themselves, perpetuating gender-related size differences within couples (Goffman, 1977; West & Zimmerman, 1987). In recent years U.S. women have become relatively larger than men and are now close to men in size (Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian 1999), suggesting dissonance between weight-related expectations and realities. Our study identified weight relativism as a contributor to women’s weight dissatisfaction. In general it was not negative input from male partners that produced women’s discontentment with their weight. Rather, it was having a partner who was perceived to be more slender than oneself that contributed to women’s discontent about weight.

Weight comparisons within romantic couples had psychological consequences for partners (Brickman & Bulman, 1977; Salovey, 1991; Tesser, 1991) who faced the “essential problem” of social comparison (Brickman & Bulman, 1977)—that one partner would feel good about his or her weight and the other would feel bad. Consequences of informants’ weight comparisons with their mate manifested in weight comparison categories we labeled weight competition, weight envy, and weight role models.

Given that “among heterosexuals, more women resent their partners being more attractive to others than vice versa” (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983, p. 581), competition, or turf wars, over weight and appearance may explain the reactions of some female informants to husbands who, disappointed in their own recent weight gains, embarked upon new weight-loss regimens in ways that sparked a sense of rivalry in the wives. Whereas competing with women over weight loss is enjoyed and considered acceptable behavior by some men (De Souza & Ciclitira, 2005), competing over weight with one’s romantic partner may prove to be problematic if it threatens the woman’s self-evaluation and adversely affects the relationship.

Weight envy was experienced most often by women who weighed about the same as, or more than, their partner and who, from comparing their own weight with their mate’s, perceived themselves as too heavy. Characteristics of weight envy identified in interviews were similar to characteristics of generalized envy described in psychology research literature (Salovey, 1991; Smith & Kim, 2007). For example, weight envy included “a sense of injustice” that the ability to maintain a relatively slender weight had been “arbitrarily bestowed” and was undeserved (Smith & Kim, 2007, p. 49). Weight envy involved envious partners using strategies to reduce both their envy of their mate’s weight and the impact of negative self-evaluations on their self-esteem (Salovey, 1991; Tesser, 1988, 1991). One strategy—undermining a comparison person’s performance (Tesser & Smith, 1980)—manifested among couples as one partner’s encouraging the other’s food intake, “sabotaging” the other’s exercise, and/or complimenting (Smith & Kim, 2007) the other’s weight gain such that mates’ weights rose into the overweight range. Like Stuart and Jacobson (1989) who described men’s “sabotage” of their wife’s weight, but unlike Pinkus et al. (2008) who did not uncover spousal undercutting, we found what appeared to be weight-envious women undermining their male partner’s weight. Weight envy contributed to couples’ conflicts over food (Bove et al., 2003) and foodwork (Bove & Sobal, 2006).

Positive role models are involved in some social comparisons (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Major, Testa, & Bylsma, 1991), including weight comparisons between romantic partners. Although some upward social comparisons damage self-evaluation, as occurred among informants who perceived their weight less favorably when compared with their mate's, others are positive experiences that inspire and provide guidance in doing better (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Major et al., 1991), which were elements of positive weight role models. Whether our informants perceived upward weight comparisons as deleterious, which resulted in weight envy, or as motivational, which produced positive weight role models, usually depended on how controllable and attainable weight management and improvement were made to look by the partner with the relatively better weight (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Major et al., 1991).

Contrasting with positive weight role models arising from some upward weight comparisons were what appeared to be complacency-fostering role models elicited by some downward weight comparisons. Although Pinkus et al.'s (2008) study of spousal comparisons did not uncover behavioral changes suggesting this outcome of downward comparisons, Lockwood (2002) suggests that comparisons with less successful others can lessen "vulnerability" to poor outcomes such that "one becomes complacent about the future and less concerned with avoiding possible negative outcomes" (p. 354). Alternatively, Lockwood, Dolderman, Sadler, and Gerchak (2004) demonstrate that among "high-closeness" couples the higher-performing partner may try to reduce the performance discrepancy between spouses by lessening his or her own performance. We suspect some partners may gain weight if they adopt the presumed relaxed weight orientation modeled by a relatively heavier mate and/or seek to decrease the differential between their own and their mate's weight.

Weight talk referred to how romantic partners communicated with each other about weight. Weight talk was an integral component of couples' body weight relationships, contributing to marital changes in weight relevance, influencing partners' weight comparisons, and affecting body weight and body image. Unlike some earlier studies of romantic partners' contributions to body satisfaction/dissatisfaction that mainly considered partners' criticism and negative comments (Befort et al., 2001; Murray et al., 1995; Ogden & Taylor, 2000; Sheets & Ajmere, 2005), our investigation examined couples' weight conversations and explored motivations behind and consequences of partners' weight-related comments. We identified several patterns of weight talk: pragmatic talk, active and tacit reassurance, and complaining and critiquing criticism.

Pragmatic weight talk was distinguished by its ease, calmness, and comfort. Pragmatic talkers spoke of "watching" their own and their mate's weights, using language like the "watching what you eat" phrase emerging from other qualitative studies of weight discourse (Nichter 2000; Smith & Ogle, 2006). Couples consistently using pragmatic weight talk included the oldest informants in our study, which is congruent with older individuals focusing on diet and weight mainly as health issues (Backett & Davison, 1995; Johnston, Reilly, & Kremer, 2004).

Active reassurance weight talk typically involved individuals seeking assurance they were not perceived as too heavy, but also included men concerned they were too slender. Thus, women and men with a wide range of weights actively sought positive feedback about their weight and reassurance that their appearance met with the mate's approval. In actively reassuring their mates about weight and helping them to feel less dissatisfied about weight and appearance, partners sometimes challenged sociocultural norms about weight (Strahan et al., 2008). However, active reassurance about weight may bestow mixed blessings upon some recipients. Receiving reassurance and compliments about one's weight may be beneficial for mental health and relationship well-being; it may not be advantageous for

physical health when one is very overweight or obese if hearing unceasing support and praise from one's mate about one's weight and appearance lessens weight's relevance, leads to relaxing about weight, and eliminates all incentive for weight loss (Heinberg, Thompson, & Matzon, 2001). Furthermore, in some instances compliments may be expressions of envy (Smith & Kim, 2007) and could be used by a partner to sabotage a more slender partner's weight.

Tacit reassurance occurred when little weight dialogue transpired between spouses. In the absence of weight talk, informants typically presumed their weight and size were acceptable to their mate and also made assumptions about their mate's attitude toward his or her own weight. Lack of discussion about weight, however, may lead a partner to underestimate or fail to recognize the mate's attention to or concerns about weight (Clark, Morrow, Brock, McGaha, & Fraenhoffer, 1998), which could contribute to couples' conflicts about food and weight (Bove et al., 2003).

Both active and tacit reassurance about a partner's weight appeared to have involved "deferential avoidance," that is, "verbal care ... so as to not bring into discussion matters that might be painful, embarrassing, or humiliating to the recipient" (Goffman, 1967, p. 65), whether about overweight (among women in particular, but also among men) or underweight (primarily among men) given that these are the weights least valued by current cultural weight norms. Consistent with this, Murray et al. (1995) observed that men who were aware of some women's sensitivity about weight avoided talking to any woman about weight. Furthermore, informants who were coupled with partners who were sensitive about their weight might have refrained from talking about, and working on, their own weight so as not to draw attention to the topic of weight or to weight comparison between spouses. Silence about weight contrasted with the weight criticism of informants who either complained about their own weight or critiqued their partner's overweight.

Complaining criticism involved one partner complaining about being overweight, articulating plans for weight loss, and delighting openly when weight loss occurred, while the mate looked on, listened, and offered support and reassurance to the partner's weight-loss efforts. By compelling the listening partner to become involved in the complaining partner's weight, complainers transformed their weight and weight monitoring into a joint couple activity akin to group monitoring (Smith & Ogle, 2006). However, women listeners appeared to detect a competitive element in their partner's weight loss (De Souza & Ciclitira, 2005) and to feel less satisfied with their own weight than prior to their partner's weight complaints, weight-loss regimens, and weight loss.

Critiquing criticism focused on individuals' complaints about their partner's overweight. Only three informants—all female—recounted their partner's criticisms of their weight, making critiquing criticism the least common pattern of weight talk. Consistent with this, Sheets and Ajmere (2005) found that only 7 percent of women in "exclusive" romantic relationships had been told by their partner to lose weight. In contrast, Murray et al. (1995) found that women often perceived romantic partners to be critical of their weight. In our study, the three women describing critiquing criticism had all experienced large weight gains and wide weight fluctuations during their relationships, suggesting that critiquing criticism may be prompted by marked changes in weight over time rather than by high absolute weight (Sobal, 1984) as well as by changes in partners' relative weights. Although critiquing criticism occurred infrequently, couples using it appeared to have more contentious relationships than other couples, which may be consistent with Pole, Crowther, and Schell's (2004) finding that married women's body dissatisfaction was associated with their husbands' criticisms and negative evaluations of their weight "within the context of a destructive marital communication pattern" (p. 277).

Our study found fat talk (Nichter, 2000; Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994), which was used by both women and men to express concern and seek reassurance about being overweight, as well as *thin talk*, which was directed at men's discomfort with their slenderness. Our work provides insights about fat talk and more generalized weight talk in mixed-gender (Britton, Martz, Bazzini, Curtin, & LeaShomb, 2006) and heterosexual, romantic-couple contexts, demonstrating that with marital commitment partners appear to feel comfortable complaining about their own weight to their mate, whether expressing concern about perceptions of overweight, underweight, or insufficient muscularity. However, contrasting with the form of reassurance most typical of fat talk, in thin talk female partners sometimes verbalized agreement that their mate was slender.

Our findings elucidate the role of male romantic partners in women's discontentment with their weight. Whereas some prior research concluded that women's dissatisfaction with their bodies was due to neither the dissatisfaction nor the criticism of their romantic partners (Markey et al., 2004; Ogden & Taylor, 2000; Sheets & Ajmure, 2005), other research suggests that women's body dissatisfaction is associated with negative spousal comments and evaluations (Pole et al., 2004). We found that most men were supportive of their female partner's weight, and that most women perceived this via weight talk with their mate. However, we also observed that male partners contributed nonetheless to the weight- and size-related disappointments experienced by some female informants, albeit indirectly through weight relativism. Thus, some men affected their partner's perception of her own body simply as the result of the man's size relative to the woman's: when her weight or size was close to or larger than his, she usually felt too heavy. For some couples, women's body dissatisfaction derived from their partner's perceptions of and feelings about his own body. Men who were disappointed they were overweight who then lost weight, continuously complaining about the former and rejoicing about the latter to their normal-weight mate, eventually left her feeling insecure about her own weight. Rarely did a woman perceive from talking with her partner that he was disappointed in her weight.

In conclusion, we used in-depth qualitative interviews to examine body weight and body image among newly married couples. We identified three major conceptual themes operating in the process of developing and enacting couples' body weight relationships: weight relevance, weight comparisons, and weight talk. We sought rich, high-quality data, but our findings have several limitations. The gendered nature of some findings might have been affected by our not interviewing and gaining access to the perspectives of six male partners. For example, our finding that only men used critiquing criticism might have been influenced by our not hearing the six men's views about whether their wives were critical of their weights. We requested individual interviews, but the demands of informants' lives led us to interview some partners as couples. Although we would have preferred to interview informants individually, assuming some would have spoken more openly about their own and/or their partner's weight if not in the partner's presence, joint interviews allowed us to hear couples' conversations about weight first-hand, which enriched our understanding of couples' weight talk (Allan, 1980; Ledyard & Morrison, 2008). Our informants' responses to retrospective interview questions might have been affected by lapses or changes in memory, which would have been more likely among couples who were in the longest relationships. Our findings pertain to early marriage only and may not represent marriages of longer duration given that body weight relationships may change as marriage duration increases. Our informants were in heterosexual marital relationships in one area in the U.S., thus these findings may not be transferable to other people or places with different expectations and experiences of weight and marriage. Our intention was not to generalize these findings beyond our informants, however, but to develop a nuanced, holistic understanding of weight and body image in a small group of newlywed couples drawn from a non-clinical, community population. The frequency and intensity of male informants'

complaints about their weight—their perceptions of overweight, underweight, and inadequate muscle definition—which were unexpected given that society discourages men from voicing their body dissatisfaction (Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000), suggests our research methods were successful in encouraging our male informants to discuss their weight.

Despite these limitations, our findings have substantive and practical significance for understanding body weight relationships at entry into marriage. Substantively, our qualitative, naturalistic inquiry provides important new insights into marriage-related weight issues and weight changes distinct from those associated with pregnancy and parenting. Our study identified the importance of social comparison in romantic couples' body weight relationships, providing real-life social contexts for furthering knowledge about weight satisfaction and dissatisfaction and social comparison processes, which several authors have suggested is needed (Kraye, Ingledew, & Iphofen, 2008; Myers & Crowther, 2009). Indeed, our study is unusual in uncovering mixed-gender weight/size social comparisons. Our identification of several patterns of weight talk as well as thin talk extends knowledge about weight discourse, expanding insights into romantic partners' weight communication. Our knowledge of thin talk is rudimentary, however, and needs further study. Practically, in elucidating the important role played by marriage in people's body weight, and in describing both the changing relevance of weight across marital transitions and the contribution of spousal weight comparisons to body image, as well as how romantic couples' weight talk influences and is influenced by partners' weights, our study provides insights relevant to counseling and educational settings. Researchers and practitioners may consider using concepts that emerged from this investigation in designing future studies of and approaches to managing body weight and preventing obesity.

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Highlights

Interviews revealed that married couples developed body weight relationships.

Weight relationships included weight relevance, weight comparisons, and weight talk.

Weight relevance involved the changing significance of weight during marriage.

Weight comparisons employed weight relativism, competition, envy, and role models.

Weight talk included pragmatic, reassuring, complaining, and critiquing talk.

Figure 1.
Components of body weight relationships: key categories, categories, and examples.