

Women see naked men differently too

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For both men and women, wearing revealing attire causes them to be seen as more sensitive but less competent, says a new study by University of Maryland psychologist Kurt Gray and colleagues from Yale and Northeastern University.

In an article just published in the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#), the researchers write that it would be absurd to think people's mental capacities fundamentally change when they remove clothing. "In six studies, however, we show that taking off a sweater—or otherwise revealing flesh—can significantly change the way a [mind](#) is perceived."

Past research, feminist theory and parental admonishments all have long suggested that when men see a woman wearing little or nothing, they focus on her [body](#) and think less of her mind. The new findings by Gray, et al. both expand and change our understanding of how paying attention to someone's body can alter how both men and women view both women and men.

"An important thing about our study is that, unlike much previous research, ours applies to both sexes. It also calls into question the nature of objectification because people without clothes are not seen as mindless objects, but they are instead attributed a different kind of mind," says UMD's Gray.

"We also show that this effect can happen even without the removal of clothes. Simply focusing on someone's attractiveness, in essence

concentrating on their body rather than their mind, makes you see her or him as less of an agent [someone who acts and plans] more of an experienter."

Objectification vs. Two Kinds of Mind

Traditional research and theories on objectification suggest that we see the mind of others on a continuum between the full mind of a normal human and the mindlessness of an inanimate object. The idea of objectification is that looking at someone in a sexual context—such as in pornography—leads people to focus on physical characteristics, turning them into an object without a mind or moral status.

However, recent findings indicate that rather than looking at others on a continuum from object to human, we see others as having two aspects of mind: agency and experience. Agency is the capacity to act, plan and exert self-control, whereas experience is the capacity to feel pain, pleasure and emotions. Various factors – including the amount of skin shown – can shift which type of mind we see in another person.

In multiple experiments, the researchers found further support for the two kinds of mind view. When men and women in the study focused on someone's body, perceptions of agency (self-control and action) were reduced, and perceptions of experience (emotion and sensation) were increased. Gray and colleagues suggest that this effect occurs because people unconsciously think of minds and bodies as distinct, or even opposite, with the capacity to act and plan tied to the "mind" and the ability to experience or feel tied to the body.

According to Gray, their findings indicate that the change in perception that results from showing skin is not all bad. "A focus on the body, and the increased perception of sensitivity and emotion it elicits might be good for lovers in the bedroom," he says.

Their study also found that a body focus can actually increase moral standing. Although those wearing little or no clothes --or otherwise represented as a body -- were seen to be less morally responsible, they also were seen to be more sensitive to harm and hence deserving of more protection. "Others appear to be less inclined to harm people with bare skin and more inclined to protect them. In one experiment, for example, people viewing male subjects with their shirts off were less inclined to give those subjects uncomfortable electric shocks than when the men had their shirts on.," Gray says.

However, Gray and his coauthors note that in work or academic contexts, where people are primarily evaluated on their capacity to plan and act, a body focus clearly has negative effects. Seeing someone as a body strips him or her of competence and leadership, potentially impacting job evaluations.

"Even more than robbing someone of agency, the increased experience that may accompany body perceptions may lead those who are characterized in terms of their bodies to be seen as more reactive and emotional, traits that may also serve to work against career advancement," they write.

Even the positive aspects of a body focus, such as an increased desire to protect from harm, can be ultimately harmful, the authors say, pointing to the "benevolent sexism" common in the United States in the 1950s, in which men oppressed women under the guise of protecting them.

Provided by University of Maryland

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