

How nudity affects perceptions

December 3 2013, by Gary W Lewandowski Jr

When meeting someone for the first time, your impression of that person may be different if you meet that person at a formal dinner party, a cocktail party, or a pool party. These settings typically influence how the person dresses and how much skin they expose. Whether you consciously pay attention to a person's exposed skin or not, focusing on their body may have unintended consequences.

We often assume that focusing too much on a person's body and physical characteristics objectifies and dehumanises that person. A 2012 study in the journal [Psychological Science](#) showed both men and women viewed other women portrayed as "sexy" as objects.

But it is less clear what takes place psychologically when we focus on a person's body and the consequences of objectification. A team of researchers, led by Paul Bloom at Yale University, conducted a series of studies, published in the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#), to determine if focusing on a person's body alters perception of that person, and if it leads to perceive that person differently and whether those perceptions can have benefits.

The naked truth

In the first study, researchers tested whether focusing on a person's face or body influenced perceived capabilities related to agency, which includes factors such as self-control, acting morally, and planning, and the person's ability to have [experiences](#), such as pleasure, hunger, and desire. Study [participants](#) received a brief description ("On weekends,

Erin/Aaron likes to hang out with friends.") along with a picture of Erin/Aaron's face only, or a picture of face and their unclothed upper body (Erin wore a bikini, Aaron was bare-chested).



Tada! Credit: judybaxte

Participants rated pictures by answering the following question, "Compared to the [average person](#), how much is this person capable of X?" The results indicated that participants who saw body-focused pictures perceived the person pictured as having more experience and less agency. Thus, participants did not fully dehumanise participants, but rather saw them as having less control, but also saw them as more sensitive to emotion and pain.

Next the researchers increased the amount of flesh participants saw by getting perceptions of naked vs clothed people. To do this, the

researchers used ten sets of professionally photographed pictures featuring an adult film actor posing for a picture from thighs on up with clothes and without clothes (genitals were blurred). These photos were an ideal comparison because the two pictures were identical, same lighting – same pose and same expression, but one was with clothes and the other without. More than 500 participants from many countries rated a single picture on the same agency and experience items as the first study. Just like before, participants rated naked participants as having more experience and less agency compared to clothed participants.

The next study extended the previous one by adding a group with pictures of the same person in an explicitly sexual pose. Thus, the researchers compared three types of pictures – fully clothed, naked-neutral expression, naked-sexual expression – on agency, experience and suggestiveness. Participants rated the naked-sexual expression picture as having the most experience and least agency compared to the fully clothed picture, with naked-neutral picture falling in between. When participants saw a picture as more sexually suggestive, they also rated the person pictured as having less agency and more experience.

Body focus

Showing more skin, it seems, makes others less capable and responsible, but also more sensitive and experienced. Focusing on exposed skin yields some positive perceptions, which is contrary to people's common perception. To see if "body-focus" had more benefits, the researchers conducted two additional studies.

First, the researchers had participants read descriptions of Michael and Jeffrey. Michael's description focused on his body, including his double jointed wrists, type-A negative blood and that his heart beats at about 80 beats/minute. In contrast, Jeffrey's description focused on his mind, including his ability to remember names by associating other words with

them, and that when he is trying to drive somewhere new, he creates a mental map in his mind.

Next participants imagined Michael and Jeffrey in two scenarios, one that asked who was more to blame after they both skipped out on a restaurant bill, and another scenario that asked which of them would suffer more harm from a mugging. Michael's body-focused description led participants to perceive him as less to blame for not paying the bill and more capable of being hurt during the mugging.

In the last study, female college students were led to believe that they could give electric shocks to another participant, who was actually part of the study. The key was whether women were more willing to shock the male confederate when he was wearing a shirt or when he was bare-chested. Results indicated that females gave fewer shocks in the body-focused condition where the male showed skin compared to the condition where he wore a shirt, ostensibly because participants were more conscious of the bare-chested male's ability to experience harm and pain.

These studies show that focusing on a person's body instead of their mind has its positives. Though it certainly has [positive aspects](#), it is important to note that this does not mean being body-focused is entirely positive. Seeing others as lacking agency may make them seem easier to control, less moral, or incapable of making decisions. But it certainly provides something to think about when choosing your next outfit.

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