

Food is inextricably bound up with gender, especially in terms of body image. In North American stereotypes, there are gendered foods (e.g., salad and chicken for women and steak and beer for men), ideal body types (muscular men and thin women), and gendered ideas about who should prepare foods of what type (women “cook” and men “grill”).

Of course, there are widely varying ideas about the connections between food, gender, and bodies based on particular cultural contexts. In North America and metropolitan centers around the world, thinness is the ideal. People’s bodies may be judged by others in terms of the amount of control over weakness they demonstrate (such as “giving in” to cravings or eating solely for pleasure). Studies relate how North American women often feel an acute sense of personal responsibility and shame if their bodies do not reflect an (often impossible) ideal.

Anthropologists Carole Counihan’s work among Florentine women in Italy (1999) and Elisa Sobo’s research in a small village in Jamaica (1993, 1997) yield different conclusions than these about body image. In both of these studies, women felt that a well-fed body was desirable, while a thin body represented poor health and an unsatisfying social life.

In the city of Florence, women embrace their love of food, easily referring to themselves as *golosa* (“loving or desiring of food”). Eating is a way to connect with others, and plumpness signifies a strong social web of people, including family, with whom a person can share food and pleasurable times. In a direct contrast to North

American women’s ideas about personal responsibility, Counihan’s informants see their body type as inherited from their families, a legacy of size and shape about which it is useless to worry.

In the coastal Jamaican village where Sobo did her research, she found that her study participants also had a view of thinness that is vastly different from the notion of positive self-control. This community interprets a thin body as evidence of “antisocial meanness.” Thinness gives away that there is something wrong with that person—she is “dry,” “come skin and bone” (1997:262). Her thinness shows that she is not well liked and clearly contributes little to her community. On the other hand, healthy reciprocal social relationships produce a plump, “juicy” body with body fat “firm like a ‘fit’ mango” (1993:33). A person with a plump body emits a sense of sensuality and fertility. She is well integrated in social networks of friends and family where the exchange of food and pleasurable company contributes to the retention of good fat.

Using a biocultural approach, we might draw upon evolutionary explanations for embracing plump bodies, especially in women. Indeed, women with extra fat stores would be seen as able to nourish a pregnancy and breastfeed an infant well. Nonetheless, cultural contexts situate standards of attractiveness and ideal body types in a web of social and cultural understanding that goes far beyond simple biological mechanisms. Culture is what dictates how people feel about their own and others’ bodies, and well as gendered ideas about those bodies.