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Body dissatisfaction among White and African American male and female college students

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Abstract

Body size perception has been shown to be highly influenced by cultural factors including race. This study assessed body size perceptions of a convenience sample of college students ($N=630$). Included in a paper-and-pencil survey were current height and weight (body mass index (BMI) = $\text{wt} [\text{kg}]/\text{ht}^2 [\text{m}]$), perceived BMI, desired MI and perceptions of BMIs desired by others. Also assessed were perceptions of underweight, acceptable weight and overweight/obesity. African American females were found to have a higher current BMI than Whites ($P \leq .001$), higher desired BMI ($P \leq .001$) and higher BMI perceived to be desired by others ($P \leq .001$). African American and White males did not differ on any of these measures. Most (83%) underweight (BMI < 19) African American females perceived themselves as underweight while only about one-half of underweight (56%) White females perceived themselves as underweight. Almost half (43%) of White females and about a fourth (27%) of African American females of acceptable BMI range (BMI = 19–25) desired to be in the underweight range. Of those who were overweight (BMI = 25–30), 20% of the Whites and only 3.0% of the African Americans chose an underweight silhouette as being desired. While African Americans and White males tended to have similar perceptions that there remains sociocultural influences in African American females regarding acceptance of a large body size. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Race; Gender; Body image

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1. Introduction

Body image has been defined as a person's mental image (perceptions, thoughts, feelings, attitudes) and evaluation of their body and the influence of this mental image and evaluation on their behavior (Garner 1995; Grogan, 1999). Body dissatisfaction, particularly size and weight, is a common attribute found in those indicating disordered eating behaviors (Garner, 1995).

Body size dissatisfaction and disordered eating appear to be widespread among young women (Delene & Bragowicz, 1992; Harris, 1995; Klemchuk, Hutchinson, & Frank, 1990; Mintz & Betz, 1988; Schulken, Pinciario, Sawyer, Jensen, & Hoban, 1997). In a college healthcare needs assessment, Delene and Brogowicz (1992) reported that 6% of students were concerned about eating disorders, 25% were concerned about weight control and 30% were extremely worried about body shape and size. These reports have resulted in college and university health professionals responding to the high prevalence of eating-related disorders (Schwitzer, Bergholz, Dore, & Salimi, 1998).

Current research investigating body size satisfaction and perception of body size among adolescents have found ethnic and gender differences (Kemper, Sargent, Drane, Valois, & Hussey, 1994; Parnell et al., 1996; Thompson, Corwin, & Sargent, 1996; Thompson, Sargent, & Kemper, 1996; Wilson, Sargent, & Dias, 1994). Wilson et al. (1994) found African American females less concerned about being overweight and seven times more likely to perceive themselves as not being overweight. African American males as compared to Whites chose a higher body mass index (BMI) as an "ideal size for a girlfriend" (Thompson, Sargent, et al., 1996).

Studies investigating body size dissatisfaction among college students have noted differences between race, ethnicity (Abrams, Allen, & Gray, 1993; Akan & Grilo, 1995; Altabe, 1998; Desmond, Price, Hallinan, & Smith, 1989; Rosen et al., 1991; Sahay & Piran, 1997) and gender (Connor-Greene, 1988; Hesse-Biber, Clayton-Matthews, & Downey, 1986; Miller, Coffman, & Linke, 1980). In most studies, White males and females appear to experience greater body size dissatisfaction than comparison groups (Abrams et al., 1993; Akan & Grilo, 1995; Altabe, 1998; Connor-Greene, 1988; Desmond et al., 1989; Hesse-Biber et al., 1986; Miller et al., 1980).

Akan and Grilo (1995) found that although the African Americans had significantly higher BMIs than Whites and Asian Americans, Whites experienced greater levels of disordered eating and body size dissatisfaction. Abrams et al. (1993) found that White female students were more concerned about weight and weight loss and made more efforts to lose weight than Black female students. Altabe (1998) found similar results with African American college students who reported having a more positive body image than Whites or Hispanics. Similarly, Desmond et al. (1989) found that African American females were more satisfied with bodies than were White females.

Although current literature notes that eating disorders and body dissatisfaction occur more frequently among White, middle- to upper-class females, recent studies have begun reporting fewer or no dissimilarities regarding body size preferences and eating disorders among the minority races (Abrams et al., 1993; Garner, 1995; Grogan, 1999; Pumariaga, Gustavson, Gustavson, Motes, & Ayers, 1994; Wilfley & Rodin, 1995). Cultural shifts in binge eating,

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