Attitudes Toward Exercise: Body Ideal versus Health

Sarah M. Buck[1], Yan Searcy[2]

[1]Department of Secondary Education, Professional Studies, and Recreation, Chicago State University
[2]School of Health and Human Services, Southern Connecticut State University

Abstract

Despite the comparatively higher levels of obesity in Black and Latina female populations, Black females and Latinas report lower levels of body dissatisfaction relative to their White counterparts, and a wider range of body shapes (including those with BMI's classified as overweight and obese) are acceptable among Blacks and Latinas compared to White females. The existence of a lower level of body dissatisfaction among Black females and Latinas and its relationship to exercise is explored through the examination of the concept of body ideal. Through survey and focus group data of Black, Latina, and White women who self-reported exercising fewer than two days weekly, the study suggests that attitudes about body ideal are culturally influenced and impact the likelihood of choosing exercise as a preventative or risk-reduction strategy to combat obesity. The study reveals that the existence of body ideals that tilt toward obesity help explain the endurance of obesity as a public health concern among Blacks and Latinas. Additionally, the study indicates that body ideals vary according to age. While the risks for obesity-related diseases increase with middle age, cultural acceptance of an obese body ideal also increases with middle age. A nuanced finding of the study suggests that plus-size clothing options that present the appearance of a culturally defined body ideal reduce the likelihood of choosing exercise to reduce obesity. Overall findings indicate that obesity risk reduction strategies that focus on exercise as a disease prevention strategy will be more effective with Blacks and Latinas than strategies that focus on decreasing BMI.

Participants

Group means (SD) of demographic data for all participants.

Race/Ethnicity	N	Age	BMI
Black	12	33.2 (13.2)	31.6 (7.6)
White	3	27.7 (7.2)	32.6 (9.1)
Latina	10	28.7 (5.4)	35.8 (21.6)

Participant Self-Assessment of Weight

Race/Ethnicity	Too thin	Satisfactory	Slightly Overweight	Moderately Overweight	Extremely Overweight
Black	1	4	3	1	3
White*		1			1
Latina		2	4	1	3

*One White participant declined to answer

Method

Sample
• Data was collected at a Midwestern urban university with a large non-traditional college student population that is categorized as a Predominantly Black Institution
• Black, White, and Latina female participants who self-reported exercising two or fewer days per week were recruited

Procedures and Data Collection: Survey
• Online survey completed on campus in an unused office
• 20 questions in three categories: individual health, perceptions about themselves, and others' perceptions about themselves
• Also included demographics questions
• Questions were both closed- and open-ended

Procedures and Data Collection: Focus Group
• Five participants attended (3 Black, 2 Hispanic, 1 White)
• Focus group was audio recorded and led by one of the researchers
• Questions were framed around cultural body ideal perceptions
• Included reactions to pictures of celebrity women of varying body sizes and race
   • Selena Gomez, Mercedes Sosa, Kelly Clarkson, Amber Riley, Rebel Wilson, Sofia Vergara, Rihanna, Taylor Swift, and Gabourey Sidibey

Data Analysis
• As an exploratory study, a qualitative research design couched in grounded theory was selected
• Grounded theory suggests that exploratory research needs to be open and there should be allowances to let the data itself point toward further questioning
• Asked questions derived from hypotheses formed from review of the literature and from observation

Survey Questions

1. Individual Health
  a. On a scale of 1-10, how important is exercise in your life? Explain.
  b. Have you ever exercised? Frequency? (If not, why not?)
  c. If you stopped exercising, why?
  d. What are your thoughts or opinions on weight as it relates to your health?
  e. Follow ups if needed: "Do you find it difficult to incorporate exercise into your daily routine?" or "Is it a priority for you to incorporate exercise into your daily routine?"
2. Perceptions about themselves
  a. How would you describe your figure?
  b. Do you think your current body size is attractive?
    i. Do you think losing weight will make you more or less attractive (or stay the same)?
    ii. Do you think exercising will make you more or less attractive (or stay the same)?
  c. Do you consider yourself to be
    i. Too thin (need to gain weight)
    ii. Satisfactory (no need to gain or lose weight)
    iii. Slightly overweight (need to lose 20 pounds or less)
    iv. Moderately overweight (need to lose 21-50 pounds)
    v. Extremely overweight (need to lose more than 50 pounds)
3. Others' perceptions about their bodies/losing weight
  a. What comes to mind when you think about ways to lose weight?
  b. What disadvantages, if any, do you see in regards to losing weight?
  c. If you were to lose weight, what would your family or friends say?
  d. Do you feel there is pressure on you to lose weight? From whom?
    i. Is there pressure on you to gain weight? From whom?
4. Is there anything else you would like to add that I did not ask about?

Focus Group Talking Points

1. Do you think there are different ideal body types for women of different ethnicities?
  a. How would you describe them?
  b. Why do you think there are differences?
2. Larger cultural issues related to race/ethnicity and beauty
  a. Show pictures of various Black, Latina, and Caucasian women from pop culture
    i. What do you think about their bodies?
    ii. Are these bodies realistic/achievable for you?
  b. Do you think there is a different weight/body type standard of beauty between Black (or White or Latina) women and other racial groups?
    i. Can you talk about what may influence these differences in standards?
  c. Do you think there is a stigma against certain body types in your culture? If so, which body sizes?
3. Are you more concerned with how you look in your clothes or out of your clothes?
  a. Does the existence of more clothing options impact your perspective on exercise?
4. How many days per week do you think are too many to exercise (i.e., how much is too much)?
5. Is it more important for you to exercise or to diet?
6. Research indicates that Black and Hispanic women have the highest prevalence of obesity and obesity related diseases compared to other ethnic groups. Why do you believe that is true?
7. Other open-ended conversation as it develops.

Grounded Theory Data Cluster by Data Source

Data Cluster	Data Collection Instrument
1. Understanding the link between exercise and health	Survey
2. Rationale for not exercising	Survey and focus group
3. Body ideal by race and ethnicity	Survey and focus group
4. Age and body ideal	Focus group
5. Role of clothing	Focus group

Results

Data Clusters
1. Understanding the link between exercise and health
• All respondents understood that regular exercise is important and that there is a positive relationship between exercising and improved overall health.
• "I believe exercise is important, but I have several other demands in my life that take priority over exercise, leaving me with little to no motivation to exercise." (Latina)
2. Rationale for not exercising
• Work, school, time, and family schedules make it difficult to incorporate exercise into daily life.
• In the focus group, it was stated that it was more important to exercise than to diet across Blacks and Latinas. Interestingly, the White respondent offered, "you have to eat, you don't have to exercise."
• For Black women, a fear of losing body shape was expressed. One stated, "I think that, speaking for myself, because the way I am built is somewhat different than most African Americans. I am more heavy busted, and less heavy hipped. So, I always thought that if I was to lose weight, I wouldn't be able to lose my breasts. I might lose all the little hips that I have. So, that's kind of true. Some people might be reluctant at changing that shape and it might not come out the way they wanted it to."
*3. Body ideal by race and ethnicity*
• Focus group comments revealed perspectives that reflected a particular racial/ethnic group but importantly revealed that there is a tacit understanding and knowledge of other dominant body ideals as promoted in major media.
• "I think that in the Latina culture/society, we are supposed to be more curvy… that's true."
• The White participant noted that for White women, "It's blond hair, blue eyes, stick skinny. I mean, that's what the media, that's what everybody, growing up, that's what is preached to you."
• Black participants indicated that the body ideal was either "thick" or a "brick house."
• Engaging the question of why Whites value thin whereas Blacks and Latinas value thick, the response indicated an ideal that is rooted in its reflection of class status. A slim body reflects the ability to pay for it, thus reflecting affluence, so thinness is valued because it indicates wealth and wealth is valued.
4. Age and body ideal
• There was an overall sentiment that age allows for cultural acceptance of a larger body ideal.
• "I notice too that as women get older, like for moms, they are not supposed to have a body. They are supposed to be like chubbier…" (Latina)
• "I think once you are a certain age, what you look like really don't matter. But, when you are like in between, like you can be healthy, older, whatever, but you won't be criticized." (Black)
• The White participant indicated agreement, stating that the image of Mercedes Sosa was not out of the ordinary and reminded her of a motherly or grandmotherly figure.
5. Role of clothing
• In response to the question in the focus group of "Do you think that the existence of having more clothing options, even stores geared toward the plus sized women, impacts your perspective on exercise?", the following response was provided by a Black participant:
  • I do. My mom, she's big. And her biggest issue for wanting to lose weight was that she could never find clothes in stores. They were always ugly, or make you look even bigger. And they did not make your confidence of being a big person worthwhile. So, now the stores that cater to the plus size and the designers that appeals to the big size and makes pretty clothes will make a person that's big more comfortable in their skin to not have to lose weight to fit in clothes like you and I can fit in. So, I think by designers making beautiful clothes, not something that's shapeless just to say you've got some clothes on, but actually put time and dedication into putting beauty into it just like they do for the skinnier people, then a lot of big people will not care so much to exercise to lose weight to fit into clothes because they are going to be pretty in whatever it is they find for their own size.
• When discussing images of the select obese celebrities, several comments were about clothes and that clothes were not flattering or failed to show curves.
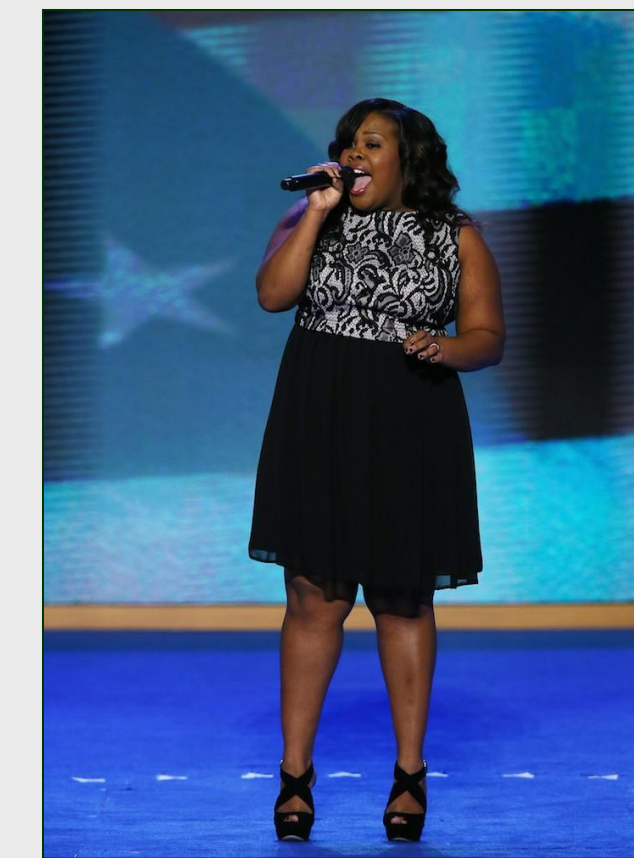
"I think she looks good. She healthy. But, she is over our ideal, but she wouldn't be called fat. She is just what we would call healthy." (Black)
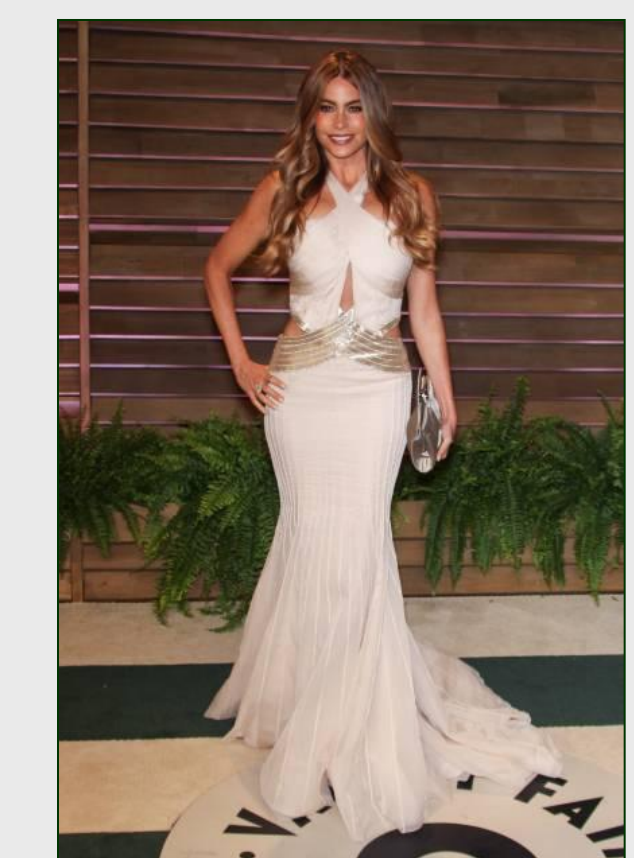

"Decent." "Normal." (Black; the White participant agreed)

"Thick." (Latina)

"Even though she's White, she has curvy features. So, it's like she is combining quite a few different ideals." (Black)

"She has been criticized for being overweight." (White)

Agreement of being an ideal among Black and Latina cultures

"I don't think it is ideal for White because she has a little more hips than ideal for White." (Black)

"There are a lot of Caucasian women now that are thicker. They have become more curvy. They are jumping on the boat, on the bandwagon." (Latina)

Conclusion

As a public health concern, efforts to address obesity must incorporate sensitivity to and awareness of cultural body ideal preferences in order to promote exercise as a prophylactic to those conditions related to high BMI. Public health professionals must be aware that approaches aiming to change body ideal perceptions and preferences for bodies with low BMIs among Blacks and Latinas may be encountered with resistance since those efforts could be construed as attempting to promote "White" cultural norms rather than a healthy BMI, therefore promoting a rejection of one's own cultural norms. The authors suggest that the likely best public health approach is to stress exercise for preventative health and health maintenance reasons rather than strictly to pursue a body ideal or fitness. A barrier to overcome remains a perception about exercise that, while it may lead to improved health outcomes, it may lead to decreasing the size of body parts that approximate cultural body ideals (i.e. breasts, hips, bottom) despite an overall high BMI. Of concern for the authors is a growing fat acceptance movement that essentially promotes acceptance of a condition that is correlated to significant health risks. The authors acknowledge and support the fat acceptance movements' promotion of building self-esteem through affirming the value of the individual, but are troubled by the relative silence of the movement on the link of obesity to health concerns.