

Ethnicity and Body Image: Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

Madeline Altabe

Department of Psychology, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida

Accepted 4 September 1996

Abstract: **Objective:** *Cultural diversity in body image has been studied elsewhere. In this study, we extend previous research by inclusion of (1) multiple ethnic groups for comparison and (2) measures for the assessment of multiple dimensions of body image.* **Method:** *Participants were college students who self-identified as African, Asian, Caucasian, or Hispanic-American. Quantitative measures of weight-related body image and general appearance body image were included. General body image was also assessed qualitatively.* **Results:** *Caucasian and Hispanic-Americans showed more weight-related body image disturbance than African-Americans and Asian-Americans. African-Americans had the most positive general appearance body image. Ethnic groups were generally similar in their ideal body image traits but some differences occurred for the valuing of skin color and breast size.* **Discussion:** *This study highlights the importance of studying multiple ethnic groups with multiple measures, rather than simply comparing non-Caucasians to Caucasians on weight-related body image.* © 1998 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. *Int J Eat Disord* 23: 153–159, 1998.

Key words: *cultural diversity; body image; ethnicity*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, it has become more common to consider ethnicity as a contributing variable in psychological phenomenon. Culture is particularly applicable to the area of body image/eating disorders because these both have been shown to relate to cultural values (Heinberg, Thompson, & Stormer, 1995). In the years that ethnicity has been researched in relation to body image, much has been learned about weight-related body image. Less information is available about non-weight-related body image.

Several authors have examined attitudes towards weight among individuals of different ethnic groups. Rosen et al. (1991) found that African-American women were more satisfied with their body weight than were Caucasian-American women. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, Ahmad, Waller, and Verduyn (1994) found that Asian schoolgirls were

Correspondence to: Madeline Altabe, Department of Psychology, 4202 East Fowler Avenue, Tampa, FL 33620. Portions of this study were presented at the 1995 convention of the Southeastern Psychological Association.

© 1998 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

CCC 0276-3478/98/020153-07

more satisfied with their weight than their Caucasian counterparts. However, Pumariega, Gustavson, Gustavson, Motes, and Ayers (1994) found that *Essence* (an African-American beauty magazine) readers were just as dissatisfied with their body weight as the predominantly Caucasian *Glamour* magazine readers had been a decade earlier.

In examining weight concern, Wardle and Marsland (1990) found that among British adolescents, Caucasian girls are more concerned about weight than either Afro-Caribbean girls or girls of Asian descent. However, Dolan, Lacey, and Evans (1990) studied adult women of the same background and found no differences in weight concern. Also in Britain, Asian-descent girls have been shown to have weight concerns similar to those of Caucasian girls (Hill & Bhatti, 1995).

Furnham and Alibhai (1983) compared the figure rating responses of Caucasian, Kenyan, and Asian-descent individuals living in Britain. The Caucasians attributed more positive characteristics to the thin figures than did the other ethnic groups.

Similarly, Furnham and Baguma (1994) compared the reactions to thin and fat figures by native British and native Ugandans. As predicted, the Ugandans rated the heavier figures more positively than did the British. Finally, Ford, Dolan, and Evans (1990) compared figure ratings of Arab students attending an English-speaking university in Egypt to the ratings of American students in Fallon and Rozin's (1985) study. Both groups rated their current figure as heavier than their ideal, but the American's ideal figure was even leaner than the Arab's ideal. Finally, Allan, Mayo, and Michel (1993) found that although black women endorsed a thin ideal figure, their comments suggested that they did not take the ideal seriously.

Thus, Caucasians appear in most studies to be more concerned about weight than other ethnic groups. Non-weight-related body image has also been the focus of study. For example, Rucker and Cash (1992) found that when compared with African-Americans, Caucasian-Americans had more negative body cognitions and evaluations of general physical appearance. Ahmad et al. (1994) found that Muslim-Asian-British children were happier with their bodies, in general, than were Caucasian-British children. However, in examining Dutch and Turkish adolescents living in The Netherlands, Verkuyten (1990) found no differences on a measure of body parts satisfaction.

Hypotheses regarding general body image in non-Caucasians require a more thorough investigation. In general, few body image studies have included more than a Caucasian versus non-Caucasian ethnic comparison. Additionally, the questionnaires used in these studies have either focused on weight or general appearance and have failed to elicit what the specific appearance concerns of non-Caucasians might be.

The following study will address these issues. It is predicted that weight-related and general appearance body image will vary among ethnic groups. Qualitatively, these groups will also differ in the body image traits of greatest concern.

METHOD

Participants

College students attending the University of South Florida participated in this study. Some individuals were recruited from student organizations relating to ethnic issues (e.g., Black Student Union, Chinese Student Union). These individuals volunteered their time. The majority of students were psychology students who participated in the study in exchange for extra credit points.

The sample consisted of 150 males and 185 females. Mean age was 21. Ethnicity was determined by means of a questionnaire. Individuals were asked to self-identify which ethnic category best described them. Participants were also asked to describe their ethnic origin in their own words. For individuals of mixed ethnicity, if one ethnicity was 50% or greater, the person was grouped in that category. If no dominant ethnicity could be determined, the individual's data was omitted from the analysis.

Measures

Participants were administered the Body Dissatisfaction (BD) scale of the Eating Disorders Inventory (EDI; Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983). This is a nine-item scale in which subjects indicate their degree of dissatisfaction with several body sites. The internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for normal controls is .91.

Participants were also administered the Figure Rating Scale (Stunkard, Sorenson, & Schlusinger, 1983). This measure consists of nine silhouettes ranging in size from very thin to very heavy. Participants were instructed to "pick the figure that best represents how you *feel* you look most of the time." They were also asked to pick the figure that matched what they *thought* they looked like. In addition, they were asked to select the figure that best represents their *own ideal* and their belief about the *ideal that most males and females hold*, that is, the cultural ideal. Finally, figure rating discrepancy scores were calculated for feel-own ideal discrepancies and think-own ideal discrepancies by subtracting the numeric values which correspond to each weight ideal. Test-retest coefficients for the current size are .83 (feel) and .89 (think). For own ideal, the reliability is .71 for females (Thompson & Altabe, 1991).

The Body Image Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire-Positive Subscale (BIATQ; Cash, Lewis, & Keeton, 1987) was used as a measure of body image thoughts. The positive scale is half as long and the two scales correlate highly. Internal consistencies for college females were .90 for both the positive and negative subscales (Brown, Johnson, Bergeron, Keeton, & Cash, 1988).

Participants were administered the Physical Appearance Discrepancy Questionnaire (PADQ; Altabe, 1996). This instrument asks individuals to list traits associated with their actual physical appearance, their ideal, and their perception of what their culture idealizes. "Their culture" is further described as whosoever opinion matters the most to them. This instrument yields a list of traits which the participants report (qualitative data). A series of scoring rules can be used to compare the actual list to each of the ideal lists yielding two scores: (1) an actual-own ideal discrepancy and (2) an actual-cultural ideal discrepancy score.

In addition to the above measures, participants completed several self-ratings relating to appearance including: (1) physical attractiveness and (2) physical appearance importance on a scale from 1 to 11.

Procedure

Individuals completed the questionnaires in groups of two or more. Some of the individuals completed the questionnaires at meetings of student groups (e.g., Black Student Union). The majority of participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology classes. The group of experimenters included two Caucasian-American females and one African-American female.

The BD and BIATQ were added midway through the study. Too few males completed it to analyze for ethnic differences among males.

RESULTS

Body Image

Several analyses were conducted to investigate the relationship between body image and ethnicity. A 2 (male, female) \times 4 (African, Asian, Caucasian, and Hispanic-American) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on the body image measures. (As has been shown repeatedly in previous studies, many gender differences emerged. Since ethnicity is the factor of interest in this study, only those gender differences that interact with ethnicity will be described. A complete description of gender differences in body image found in this study is available from the author.)

Two of the measures which assessed weight-related body image showed significant effects. For feel-ideal figure rating discrepancy, significant effects emerged for ethnicity [$F(3, 271) = 3.23, p < .05$]. Follow-up Fisher's least significant difference tests (LSD) revealed that Caucasians showed more size discrepancy than African-Americans ($p < .01$) and Asian-Americans ($p < .05$; see Table 1). Hispanic-Americans showed more discrepancy than African-Americans ($p < .05$). The pattern for body dissatisfaction (in females) was similar. There was a significant effect of ethnicity [$F(3, 123) = 3.30, p < .05$]. Caucasians showed more body dissatisfaction than Asian-Americans ($p < .05$) and Hispanic-Americans more body dissatisfaction than either Asian or African-Americans ($p < .05$ for both).

Several non-weight-related body image variables also differed among ethnic groups. These variables were self-ratings of attractiveness [$F(3, 243) = 10.84, p < .001$], African-Americans had higher self-ratings than Hispanic-Americans who in turn had higher ratings than either Caucasian-Americans or Asian-Americans (Fisher's LSD, $p < .05$). For importance of appearance to self-esteem [$F(3, 241) = 3.06, p < .05$] all groups scored higher than Asian-Americans (Fisher's LSD, $p < .05$). Finally, on the positive scale of the BIATQ [$F(3, 123) = 4.36, p < .01$], African-American women had more positive cognitions than all other groups ($p < .01$).

Qualitative Analyses

Finally, to analyze ethnic differences in the content of body image concerns, frequency counts were conducted on the PADQ responses. The five most common ideal traits for

Table 1. Mean weight-related body image scores by ethnic group

Ethnic Group	Body Image Score	
	Feel-Ideal Figure Rating	Body Dissatisfaction ^d
African-American	0.48 _a	7.59 _{a,b}
Asian-American	0.65 _{a,b}	6.16 _a
Caucasian-American	1.23 _c	10.41 _{b,c}
Hispanic-American	1.07 _{b,c}	10.08 _c

Note: Means in the same column with the same subscript are not significantly different by the Fisher least significant different test ($p < .05$).

^dFemales only. Insufficient data to analyze this variable for males.

both genders and all ethnicities are listed in Table 2. Height was valued by all groups. All the female groups and the Asian and Caucasian males wanted to be thinner. All the males and the African and Caucasian females wanted to be more toned. Non-Caucasian females wanted longer hair. All groups valued dark or wanted darker skin except for African-American females and Asian males.

The issue of skin color is a complex one among African-Americans. Among African-Americans, darkness of skin tone is associated with stereotyped beliefs (Okazawa-Rey, Robinson & Ward, 1987) and light skin tone is idealized (Bond & Cash, 1992). Because of this, darker skin as an ideal and cultural ideal trait was subjected to chi-square analyses. Asian-Americans had the highest proportion of individuals who valued light skin (15.7%), African-Americans the second highest (7.6%; Caucasians, 4.0%; Hispanics, 2.1%; chi-square ($df = 3$) = 10.59, $p < .05$). However, on the cultural ideal, Asian and African-Americans both reported light skin as an ideal trait in similar proportions (23.53% and 21.21%, respectively; Caucasians, 8.00%; Hispanics, 10.53%; chi-square ($df = 3$) = 8.8, $p < .05$). For both own ideal and cultural ideal, Caucasian and Hispanic-Americans reported light skin as a trait in much fewer numbers.

It is of interest to know if attitudes towards breast size vary across group. Jacobi and Cash (1994) found that 40% of women preferred to have breasts larger than their own. In our sample, fewer women spontaneously mentioned larger breasts and that number varied across ethnicities: 13.4% for Hispanic-American females, 4.4% of Caucasian-Americans, and no African or Asian-Americans. This difference was significant [chi-square ($df = 3$) = 11.00, $p < .05$].

DISCUSSION

Ethnic differences emerged for the body image variables under consideration. For weight-related body image, Caucasians and Hispanics showed the most disturbance,

Table 2. Most common traits mentioned on the ideal list by ethnicity and gender

Group	Gender	
	Males	Females
African-Americans	Tall or taller Toned Dark or darker skin Medium frame Brown eyes	Long or longer hair Tall or taller Thin or thinner Toned Brown eyes
Asian-Americans	Tall or taller Toned Brown hair Thin or thinner Light or lighter skin	Tall or taller Thin or thinner Brown hair Long or longer hair Dark or darker skin
Caucasian-Americans	Tall or taller Tone Thin or thinner Dark or darker skin Blonde hair/nice teeth	Tall or taller Thin or thinner Blonde hair Dark or darker skin Toned
Hispanic-Americans	Tall or taller Dark or darker skin Toned Brown hair Brown eyes	Tall or taller Thin Dark or darker skin Long hair Brown hair

African and Asian-Americans the least. For general appearance body image, African-Americans had the most positive self-view. Asian-Americans placed the least importance on physical appearance. Thus, ethnic differences occurred for both weight and non-weight dimensions of body image. However, the pattern of ethnic differences was different for these two dimensions of body image.

In our sample, African-Americans differed from Caucasian-Americans on both weight and non-weight dimensions as in previous studies (Rosen et al., 1991; Rucker & Cash, 1992). Asian-Americans also differed from Caucasian-Americans on weight-related body image supporting some studies done in Britain comparing the two ethnic groups (Ahmad et al., 1994; Wardle & Marsland, 1990). These groups did not differ on general appearance body image. Hispanic-Americans have been studied the least for the difference in body image. No differences emerged when comparing this group to Caucasian-Americans. This group needs further study.

The results relating to breast size expand upon previous research (Jacobi & Cash, 1994; Thompson & Tantleff, 1992) done with the general population and point out that ethnic groups may vary on body image traits other than weight. Similarly, the differences among ethnic groups in preference for lighter skin point out the need to expand exploration of the issue beyond just African-Americans.

Future Directions

Overall, this study and previous studies support the idea that some non-Caucasians have a more positive body image than Caucasians. The variability in results across studies suggests that other factors, such as ethnic identification, may be important.

The qualitative data in this study suggest some body image differences in ethnicities that would have been missed by a standard questionnaire. Qualitative measures should continue to be useful in pinpointing areas of body image research.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, S., Waller, G., & Verduyn, C. (1994). Eating attitudes among Asian school girls: The role of perceived parental control. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 15*, 91-97.
- Allan, J. D., Mayo, K., & Michel, Y. (1993). Body size values of white and black women. *Research in Nursing and Health, 16*, 323-333.
- Altabe, M. (1996). Issues in the assessment and treatment of body image disturbance in culturally diverse populations. In J. K. Thompson (Ed.), *Eating disorders, obesity, and body image: A practical guide to assessment and treatment*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Books.
- Bond, S., & Cash, T. F. (1992). Black beauty: Skin color and body images among African-American college women. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 22*, 874-888.
- Brown, T. A., Johnson, W. G., Bergeron, K. C., Keeton, W. P., & Cash, T. F. (1988, November). *Assessment of body-related cognitions in bulimia: The Body Image Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire*. Paper presented at the Association of the Advancement of Behavior Therapy, New York.
- Cash, T. F., Lewis, R. J., & Keeton, P. (1987, March). *Development and validation of the Body-Image Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire: A measure of body-related cognitions*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, Atlanta, GA.
- Dolan, B., Lacey, J. H., & Evans, C. (1990). Eating behaviour and attitudes to weight and shape in British women from three ethnic groups. *British Journal of Psychiatry, 157*, 523-528.
- Fallon, A., & Rozin, P. (1985). Sex differences in the perceptions of desirable body shape. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 94*, 102-105.
- Ford, K. A., Dolan, B. M., & Evans, C. (1990). Cultural factors in the eating disorders: A study of body shape preferences of Arab students. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 34*, 501-507.
- Furnham, A., & Alibhai, N. (1983). Cross-cultural differences in the perception of female body shapes. *Psychological Medicine, 13*, 829-837.

- Furnham, A., & Baguma, P. (1994). Cross-cultural differences in the evaluation of male and female body shapes. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 15*, 81–89.
- Garner, D. M., Olmstead, M. A., & Polivy, J. (1983). Development and validation of a multidimensional Eating Disorder Inventory for anorexia nervosa and bulimia. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 2*, 15–34.
- Heinberg, L. J., Thompson, J. K., & Stormer, S. (1995). Development and validation of the Sociocultural Attitudes towards Appearance Questionnaire. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 17*, 81–89.
- Hill, A. J., & Bhatti, R. (1995). Body shape perception and dieting in preadolescent British Asian girls: Links with eating disorders. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 17*, 175–183.
- Jacobi, L., & Cash, T. F. (1994). In pursuit of the perfect appearance: Discrepancies among self-ideal percepts of multiple physical attributes. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 24*, 379–396.
- Okazawa-Rey, M., Robinson, T., & Ward, J. V. (1987). Black women and the politics of skin color and hair. *Women and Therapy, 6*, 89–102.
- Pumariega, A. J., Gustavson, C. R., Gustavson, J. C., Motes, P. S., & Ayers, S. (1994). Eating attitudes in African-American women: The Essence eating disorders survey. *Eating Disorders: The Journal of Treatment and Prevention, 2*, 5–16.
- Rosen, E. F., Anthony, D. L., Booker, K. M., Brown, T. L., Christian, E., Crews, R. C., Hollins, V. J., Privette, J. T., Reed, R. R., & Petty, L. C. (1991). A comparison of eating disorder scores among African-American and white college females. *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society, 29*, 65–66.
- Rucker, C. E., & Cash, T. F. (1992). Body images, body-size perceptions and eating behaviors among African-American and White college women. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 12*, 291–299.
- Stunkard, A. J., Sorenson, T., & Schlusinger, F. (1983). Use of the Danish adoption registers for the study of obesity and thinness. In S. S. Kety, L. P. Rowland, R. L. Sidman, & S. W. Matthysse (Eds.), *The genetics of neurological and psychological disorders* (pp. 115–120). New York: Raven Press.
- Thompson, J. K., & Altabe, M. N. (1991). Psychometric properties of the figure rating scale. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 10*, 15–19.
- Thompson, J. K., & Tantleff, S. (1992). Female and male ratings of upper torso: Actual, ideal and stereotypical conceptions. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality, 7*, 345–354.
- Verkuyten, M. (1990). Self-esteem and the evaluation of ethnic identity among Turkish and Dutch adolescents in the Netherlands. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 130*, 285–297.
- Wardle, J., & Marsland, L. (1990). Adolescent concerns about weight and eating: A social-developmental perspective. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 34*, 377–391.