

Body Type Preferences and Body Characteristics Associated with Attractive and Unattractive Bodies by African Americans and Anglo Americans

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Body type preferences, body characteristics associated with body attractiveness, and personal characteristics associated with unattractive body types (e.g., obese bodies) were examined in African American and Anglo American female and male respondents. African American males preferred larger body types for females, and associated more favorable and fewer unfavorable characteristics with obese females than did Anglo American males. Females of both races preferred a slightly thin body type for males, although African American females associated fewer unfavorable characteristics with obese males than did Anglo American females. Difference between the races in body characteristics associated with attractiveness suggest race-specific prototypes of body attractiveness that correspond to physical differences between the races. Race-specific standards of attractiveness within cultures are discussed.

Body type preferences and body ideals have been of interest to researchers and the general public for decades (Jackson, 1992). Most of the research has been conducted in the United States using Anglo American samples (e.g., Polivy, Garner, Feldman, & Garfinkel, 1986; Ryckman et al., 1991; Singh, 1993, 1994). More recent research has considered the importance of race and culture in understanding body type preferences (Desmond, Price, Hamilton, & Smith, 1989; Feldman & Goodman, 1988; Harris & Harris, 1992; Kumanyika, 1987; Thomas & James, 1988; Wright & Whitehead, 1987). Our research focused on race differences in the United States

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in body type preferences, body characteristics associated body attractiveness, and the obese stereotype.

It is now well established that Anglo American females prefer a thin body for themselves, but an average body for males of their race (Polivy et al., 1986). Anglo American males prefer an average body for themselves, and express an equal preference for thin and average body types for females, although they realize that females prefer a thin body for themselves (Furnham & Radley, 1989; Furnham, Hester, & Weir, 1990).

Also well established is the importance of cultural context in understanding body type preferences (Massara & Stunkard, 1979; Rittenbaugh, 1982). In western cultures (e.g., United States, Sweden, Britain), societal pressures to be thin increase with increasing socioeconomic status (Goldblatt, Moore, & Stunkard, 1965; Silverstone, Gordon, & Stunkard, 1969), and obesity decreases with increasing socioeconomic status (Bjurulf & Lindgreen, 1964; Silverstone, 1970; Silverstone et al., 1969; Baird, Silverstone, & Grimshaw, 1974). In contrast, a positive relationship between body weight and socioeconomic status has been observed in less affluent, developing countries [e.g., India (Mayer, 1955); Latin America and Puerto Rico (Dolan, 1990); South China (Chang, Lee, & Low, 1966)]. Indeed, some cultures value obesity, or at least find it more acceptable than does the Anglo American culture (Antons-Brandt, 1972; Chigier & Chigier, 1968; Furnham & Alibhai, 1983; Furnham & Baguma, 1994; Iwawaki & Lerner, 1974; Powers, 1980).

Differences in body type preferences and obese stereotypes have also been observed within cultures. In the United States, findings suggest that African American females prefer a larger body size for themselves than do Anglo American females (Kemper et al., 1994; Parnell et al., 1996; Wilson, Sargent, & Dias, 1994), and that same-race males share this preference (i.e., prefer larger bodied females; Maddox, Back, & Liederman, 1968; Thompson, Sargent, & Kemper, 1996). Moreover, African American females are more satisfied with their bodies (Cash & Henry, 1995) and perceive fewer negative implications of obesity than do Anglo American females (Thomas & James, 1988). Such findings are particularly important in light of the evidence that African American females are more likely to be obese (48.5%) than Anglo American females (32.1%; Kuczmarski, Flegel, Campbell, & Johnson, 1994), and that the prevalence of obesity among African American females increases with age (Gortmaker, Dietz, & Cheung, 1990; Kemper et al., 1994; Kumanyika, 1987; Wilson et al., 1994; Wing et al., 1989).

A number of thoughtful discussions of race differences in body type preferences and body satisfaction in the United States have appeared in the literature. Root (1990) suggested that African Americans and other racial and ethnic minority groups in the United States place less emphasis

on physical appearance than do Anglo Americans, which may account in part for their greater acceptance of obesity. Thomas and James (1988) offered three explanations for race differences for females. First, African American females may believe African American males are more accepting of a large female body, and may even prefer a large body to the thin Anglo standard. Second, African American females may believe race differences in physique (e.g., body size, body shape) make a "thin ideal" unrealistic for them. Yet a third possibility is that African American females may not endorse, or may actively reject, the thin ideal of Anglo American females.

Research on the stereotypes of the obese has been limited to Anglo American respondents. In general, obese people are perceived as having a variety of undesirable characteristics (e.g., lazy, unintelligent; Allon, 1982; Crandall & Biernat, 1990; DeJong & Kleck, 1986; Harris, Harris, & Bochner, 1982), although the specific characteristics associated with obesity vary somewhat from study to study (DeJong & Kleck, 1986).

The purpose of our research was to examine differences between African Americans and Anglo Americans in: (1) body type preferences for same-race, other-gender targets; (2) body characteristics associated with body attractiveness in same-race, other-gender targets; and (3) personal characteristics associated with obese same-race, other-gender targets. Two hypotheses were suggested by previous research:

Hypothesis 1: African American males prefer larger body types for African American females, and associate larger body characteristics (e.g., buttocks, hips) with female body attractiveness than do Anglo American males.

No hypothesis was formulated for females' preferences for male body types because no research has considered these preferences among African American females. Thus, it is unclear whether African American females prefer thin, average, or obese bodies for African American males.

Hypothesis 2: African Americans hold more favorable stereotypes of the obese than do Anglo Americans, regardless of target or respondent gender.

METHODS

Respondents and Procedures

Respondents were 83 college undergraduates, approximately 21 years of age, who were participating in summer academic programs at a large midwestern university in the United States. The sample consisted of 23 African American males, 20 African American females, 20 Anglo American males, and 20 Anglo American females.

Respondents were approached by the second author (an African American female) and asked to complete an anonymous survey about body type preferences. They were approached in residence halls, dining rooms, and at gatherings of students participating in the summer academic programs. All individuals approached agreed to complete the 10-minute survey.

Materials

Four forms of The Body Type Preferences Survey were constructed to correspond to the 4 target/respondent group combinations (i.e., African American female targets/African American male respondents; African American male targets/African American female respondents; Anglo American female targets/Anglo American male respondents; Anglo American male targets/Anglo American female respondents). The survey consisted of 3 pages, the last of which contained 5 silhouettes of other-gender targets, representing 5 body types: (1) thin, (2) slightly thin, (3) average, (4) slightly heavy, and (5) heavy. Respondents first indicated which of the 5 body types they themselves found most attractive, which they believed same-race, same-gender others would find most attractive, and which they believed same-race, other-gender others would find most attractive.

Next, respondents indicated how important each of 18 body characteristics (19 for male targets) were to their judgments of attractiveness in same-race, other-gender individuals. Characteristics were selected from research by Jackson, Sullivan, and Hymes (1987), and from "hunches" of the authors about which might be important to each race. Similar characteristics were used for female and male targets with the exception of large penis (male targets only) and pretty toes (female targets only), although labels varied to be gender appropriate (e.g., large breasts for female targets became a muscular chest for male targets). Five-point ratings scale were used in which (1) *very unimportant to her(his) attractiveness* and (5) *very important to her(his) attractiveness*.

On page 2 of the survey respondents indicated the ideal weight and ideal height for a same-race, other-gender person. They then indicated the extent to which they themselves associated 18 personal characteristics with same-race, other-gender individuals who were "substantially OVERWEIGHT." Five-point rating scales were used in which (1) *definitely not* (true of an overweight female(male)) and (5) *definitely* (true of an overweight female(male)).

Table I. Body Type Preferences of African American and Anglo American Respondents for Same-Race, Other-Gender Targets^a

	Males		Females	
	African American (<i>n</i> = 23)	Anglo American (<i>n</i> = 20)	African American (<i>n</i> = 20)	Anglo American (<i>n</i> = 20)
Self-preferences				
Very thin	0	0	0	5
Slightly thin	0	55	80	85
Average	95	45	20	10
Slightly heavy	5	0	0	0
Very heavy	0	0	0	
Beliefs about the preferences of same-race, same-gender others				
Very thin	0	15	0	10
Slightly thin	4.3	60	70	50
Average	87	25	25	35
Slightly heavy	8.7	0	5	5
Very heavy	0	0	0	
Beliefs about the preferences of same-race, other-gender others				
Very thin	13.1	3.5	0	10
Slightly thin	39.1	50	60	40
Average	47.8	15	30	40
Slightly heavy	0	0	5	5
Very heavy	0	0	5	5

^aValues are percentages of respondents choosing that silhouette.

RESULTS

Respondents' self-preferences, beliefs about the preferences of same-race, same-gender others, and beliefs about the preferences of same-race, other-gender others are presented in Table I.

In support of Hypothesis 1, African American males preferred an average body type for same-race females over the slightly thin body type, whereas Anglo American males were about equally divided in their preference for average and slightly thin body types for same-race females [$\chi^2(2) = 22.05, p < .001$]. Similarly, African American males believed other African American males would prefer the average body type over the slightly thin type, whereas Anglo American males believed other Anglo American males would prefer the slightly thin body type over the average type [$\chi^2(3) = 30.72, p < .001$].

With respect to same-race, other-gender preference, African American males believed African American females would prefer the average or slightly thin body over the very thin type, whereas Anglo American males believed Anglo American females would prefer the slightly thin type over the average or very thin body types [$\chi^2(4) = 9.73, p < .05$].

There were no difference between African American and Anglo American females in their self-preferences, beliefs about the preferences of same-race, same-gender others, or beliefs about the preferences of same-race, other-gender others. Both groups preferred the slightly thin male body type (83%), and believed same-gender (60%) and other-gender others (51%) of their race shared this preference.

Race differences in ideal body weight for same-race, other-gender targets also supported Hypothesis 1. African American males believed the ideal weight for an African American female was 133 pounds, close to the actual average weight of American women (136 pounds; Hodge, Jackson, & Sullivan, 1993), whereas Anglo American males believed the ideal weight for an Anglo American female was 125 pounds, more than 10 pounds less than the average weight [$F(1, 41) = 6.69, p < .01$]. Both groups believed that 67" was the ideal height for a same-race female.

As was true for body type preferences, African American and Anglo American females held similar views about the ideal weight and height for males. Both groups believed that 177 pounds was the ideal weight, and 72"-73" was the ideal height.

Additional support for Hypothesis 1 was found in the body characteristics associated with body attractiveness. Means and F ratios for the analyses are presented in Table II.

African American males considered wide hips and a round buttocks as more important to female body attractiveness than did Anglo American males, who considered a slim figure to be more important. In addition, African American males considered pretty toes as more important than did Anglo American males.

African American females believed full lips and muscular legs were more important to male body attractiveness than did Anglo American females, who considered silky hair texture to be more important. There were also marginally significant tendencies for African American females to consider good skin/complexion, muscular chest, large penis, nice smile, short hair, and a flat stomach to be more important than did Anglo American females, who considered light-colored eyes and light skin tone to be more important.

Also revealed in Table II are the body characteristics considered important to attractiveness by each race/gender group. Male of both races considered good skin/complexion, a nice smile, and a pretty face as important to attractiveness (i.e., rating of 4 or 5 on the 5-point scale). African American males, but not Anglo American males, considered shapely legs and a round buttocks as important. The only characteristics that female respondents considered important were a nice smile and an attractive face.

Table II. Body Characteristics Associated with Body Attractiveness in Same-Race, Other-Gender Targets by African American and Anglo American Respondents^a

	African American	Anglo American	F ratio
Males			
Good skin/clear complexion	4.35	4.30	0.07
Large breasts	3.30	3.10	0.47
Narrow waist	3.57	3.85	1.26
Light-colored eyes	2.09	2.05	0.01
Pretty toes	3.35	2.25	8.96 ^c
Full lips	3.35	3.30	0.07
Shapely legs	4.00	3.90	0.25
Wide hips	3.00	2.30	3.97 ^b
Small/narrow nose	2.26	2.65	1.62
Nice smile	4.48	4.30	0.70
Long hair	3.35	3.15	0.58
Athletic build	3.65	3.70	0.04
Round buttocks	4.30	3.60	13.89 ^c
Slim figure	3.17	3.85	8.40 ^c
Lighter skin tone	2.35	2.30	0.02
Flat stomach	3.78	3.95	0.46
Pretty face	4.39	4.50	0.25
Silky hair texture	3.04	3.50	2.08 ^d
Females			
Good skin/clear complexion	4.15	3.90	2.84 ^d
Muscular chest	3.70	3.30	2.71 ^d
Slim waist	3.45	3.65	1.32
Light-colored eyes	1.60	2.20	3.26 ^d
Tall	3.50	3.65	0.21
Full lips	3.20	2.50	5.44 ^a
Muscular legs	3.85	3.30	5.05 ^a
Narrow hips	3.05	3.20	0.42
Small/narrow nose	2.35	2.55	0.45
Nice smile	4.50	4.10	2.92 ^d
Short hair	3.45	2.85	2.22 ^d
Muscular upper body	3.85	3.55	1.75
Round buttocks	3.50	3.05	1.54
Slim figure	3.50	3.50	0.00
Lighter skin tone	1.85	2.45	3.65 ^d
Muscular stomach	3.80	3.40	3.04 ^d
Attractive face	4.10	4.40	1.84
Silky hair texture	2.15	2.90	6.22 ^b
Large penis	3.15	2.55	2.22

^aFive-point rating scales were used in which (1) *very unimportant to attractiveness*, and (5) *very important to attractiveness*. For males, $df = 1, 41$; for females, $df = 1, 38$.

^b $p < .05$.

^c $p < .001$.

^d $p < .1$.

Table III. Personal Characteristics Associated with Obese Same-Race, Other-Gender Targets by African American and Anglo American Respondents^a

	Males			Females		
	African American	Anglo American	F Ratio	African American	Anglo American	F Ratio
Lazy	3.04	3.75	5.66 ^b	3.25	3.40	0.34
Happy	2.61	2.50	0.25	2.90	2.75	0.55
Powerful	2.91	2.50	2.43 ^c	2.63	2.30	1.75
Sexy	2.09	1.80	1.16	2.16	1.60	5.81 ^c
Disgusting	2.35	3.00	4.76 ^b	2.70	2.70	0.00
Energetic	2.35	2.10	1.08	2.35	2.00	2.51
Attractive	2.61	2.05	5.18 ^b	2.45	2.25	0.57
Generous	3.39	3.15	1.41	3.20	3.20	0.00
Uneducated	1.65	2.30	5.86 ^b	2.45	2.35	0.12
Poor	2.13	2.45	1.63	2.45	2.50	0.03
Unhealthy	3.43	4.10	5.80 ^b	3.85	3.75	0.08
Interesting	3.09	2.95	0.44	2.80	2.90	0.22
Slow	3.17	3.25	0.06	3.15	3.20	0.03
Lacks willpower	2.82	3.50	6.17 ^b	3.05	3.00	0.03
Depressed	2.74	3.25	4.73 ^b	3.00	2.80	0.79
Sloppy	2.74	3.20	2.94 ^c	3.10	2.90	0.48
Outgoing	3.04	3.02	0.08	3.05	3.00	0.06
Ambitious	3.14	2.85	3.77 ^b	3.00	2.65	2.81 ^c

^aFive-point rating scales were used in which (1) *definitely not associated* and (5) *definitely associated*. For males, $df = 1,41$; for females, $df = 1,38$.

^b $p < .05$.

^c $p < .01$.

African American females, but not Anglo American females, also considered good skin/complexion as important.

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, characteristics associated with obese, same-race females differed for African American and Anglo American males. Means and F ratios for the analyses are presented in Table III.

African American males were less likely to associate negative characteristics (e.g., lazy, uneducated) and more likely to associate positive characteristics (e.g., attractive, generous) with same-race obese females than were Anglo American males. Only one characteristic distinguished the two groups of females. African American females were more likely to associate sexiness with obese same-race males than were Anglo American females.

Also revealed in Table III are the characteristics associated with obesity by each race/gender group. Being unsexy was strongly associated with obesity by Anglo American respondents of either gender, but not by African American respondents. Anglo American males associated being unhealthy with obesity in females, whereas African American males did not, and rejected any association between weight and education (i.e., obese females

were not perceived as uneducated). Anglo American females strongly associated being less energetic with obese males of their race.

DISCUSSION

Our research revealed both differences and similarities in the body type preferences and body characteristics associated with attractive and unattractive bodies by African Americans and Anglo Americans. Findings for male respondents may be summarized as follows: (1) African American males preferred a larger female body type than did Anglo American males, as revealed in both their choice of silhouettes and in the characteristics they considered important to body attractiveness (e.g., wide hips, round buttocks). (2) Both groups of males considered good skin/complexion, a nice smile, and a pretty face as important to female attractiveness. (3) African American males associated fewer unfavorable characteristics (e.g., lazy, uneducated) and more favorable characteristics (e.g., attractive, generous) with obese same-race females than did Anglo American males.

For female respondents: (1) African American and Anglo American females both preferred a slightly thin male body type to an average body type. (2) African American females considered full lips and muscular legs to be more important to male body attractiveness than did Anglo American females, who considered silky hair texture to be more important. There were also marginal tendencies for African American females to consider good skin/complexion, muscular chest, large penis, nice smile, short hair, and a flat stomach to be more important than did Anglo American females, who considered light-colored eyes and light skin to be more important. (3) Both groups of females considered a nice smile and an attractive face as important to male attractiveness. (4) African American females were more likely to associate sexiness with obese same-race males than were Anglo American females.

Overall, findings for male respondents support the suggestion of previous research that African American males prefer, and attribute more favorable characteristics to larger female bodies than do Anglo American males (Root, 1990; Thomas & James, 1988). Moreover, their preference may help explain why African American females have more favorable body images, and are less concerned about weight loss and dieting than are Anglo American females (Cash & Henry, 1995). As Thompson et al. (1996) point out, self-perceptions of body attractiveness are influenced by the standards of attractiveness held by relevant others. For African American females, African American males provide a more relevant standards of attractiveness than the (thin) standard provided by the Anglo American culture.

Fewer differences in body type preferences and associated characteristics were observed between African American and Anglo American females than males. Both groups preferred a slightly thin male body type, in contrast to previous research indicating a preference for the average male body by Anglo American females (Furnham & Radley, 1989; Furnham et al., 1990). Although the nature of our silhouettes may account in part for the discrepancy in findings, it is also possible that the current emphasis on health, fitness, and having a trim body has influenced females' preferences. New standards of male body attractiveness may be emerging that reflect the relationship between thinness and health for both genders.

Characteristics considered important to attractiveness by both races are consistent with cross-cultural findings that facial attractiveness and a warm personality are important in mate selection (Buss, 1989). From an evolutionary perspective, facial attractiveness (including a good complexion) serves as a cue to health and reproductive fitness (Buss & Barnes, 1986). A nice smile serves as a cue to a warm personality and a nurturant and caring provider. From a cultural perspective, the importance of facial attractiveness and a warm personality are well established for both other-gender and same-gender targets (Jackson, 1992).

Additional characteristics considered important to body attractiveness suggest that there may be race-specific standards of attractiveness within the larger U. S. culture. Specifically, African American males considered wide hips and a round buttocks as important, and African American females considered full lips and muscular legs as important. Actual physical differences between the races indicate that African American females have wider hips and a more rounded buttocks than do Anglo American females, and that African American males have fuller lips and more muscular legs than do Anglo American males (Barnicott, 1964; Stringer, 1990).

Thus, race differences in the importance of characteristics associated with body attractiveness correspond to actual physical differences between the races. Moreover, they suggest that physical characteristics that distinguish one's race may be more important in judgments of same-race attractiveness than nondistinguishing characteristics. Thus, prototypes of body attractiveness may be race specific, rather than culture specific (i.e., prototypes for all Americans). One question for future research is whether race-specific prototypes are shared by other-race members. Specifically, do Anglo Americans use the same characteristics in judging the attractiveness of African Americans as African Americans use for themselves? Or do Anglo Americans apply the same standards to African Americans as they apply to themselves?

Surprising was our finding that African Americans did not consider skin tone to be important to same-race attractiveness, in contrast to pre-

vious findings suggesting that a lighter skin tone is preferred (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). It may be that African Americans do not consider skin tone a distinguishing characteristic because they are more aware of variations in skin tone among ingroup members than are Anglo Americans. Alternatively, and not incompatibly, it may be that today's young adult African Americans no longer value the lighter skin tone of Anglo Americans. Additional research is needed to reexamine the importance or lack of importance of skin tone to African Americans, not only in terms of attractiveness but also in terms of ingroup identification and self-esteem.

Our research indicates that body type preferences, body characteristics associated with attractiveness, and obese stereotypes depend to some extent on race. African American respondents, but particularly males, expressed different body type preferences, associated different body characteristics with attractiveness, and had more favorable perceptions of the obese than did Anglo American respondents. How these differences develop within a "common culture" is a question for future research. Answers to this question may be helpful in answering other questions about racial and ethnic group differences in standards (e.g., standards for social behavior, achievement standards), and how group differences in standards serve to enhance a positive social identity for group members.

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