Body Image Ideals of Low-Income African American Mothers and Their Preadolescent Daughters

Kristin Flynn and Marian Fitzgibbon

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Given the high incidence of obesity and obesity-related health problems among low-income African American women, it is both timely and significant to study factors that contribute to obesity in this population. The perception of current body size (body image) and desired body size (body image ideal) has been associated with the development of anorexia and bulimia in white adolescent girls. Body images and ideals may also be related to the development of obesity among African American adolescent girls. This study examined the body images and ideals of 27 low-income African American mothers and their 29 preadolescent daughters. Results suggest that there is a relationship between mothers' perceptions of their daughters' bodies and their daughters' body images. Preadolescent, low-income, African American girls have normal weight ideals rather than the ultrathin ideals typically found among white girls. Normal weight girls have ideals that are heavier than their body images. This population may be less motivated than those with thinner ideals to engage in behaviors that would prevent the development of obesity during adolescence. Health promotion programs for this population should acknowledge cultural body weight standards.

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1Clinical Psychology Doctoral Student in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Northwestern University Medical School. Received B.A from the University of Pennsylvania. Research interests include cross-cultural studies of body image, eating disorders, health risk perceptions, and health promotion programs.

2Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences and the Department of Preventive Medicine at Northwestern University Medical School, Director of Eating Disorders Program at Northwestern Memorial Faculty Foundation. Received Ph.D. from in Clinical Psychology from Long Island University. Research interests include obesity prevention, binge eating, and cultural differences in eating behavior.
INTRODUCTION

While 33% of white women are obese, nearly 49% percent of all African American women are obese (Kuczmarski et al., 1994). Not surprisingly, obesity-related mortality rates due to cardiovascular disease, stroke, and diabetes are also higher among African American women (Kumanyika and Adams-Campbell, 1991; Kumanyika, 1993). Obesity is also more prevalent among people in low socioeconomic status groups (Sobal and Stunkard, 1989). Given that 51.2% of African American women live below the poverty level (Bureau of the Census, 1994), obesity is a significant threat to the health of many low-income African American women (Croft et al., 1992; Rand and Kulda, 1990). Because of this health risk, we must study those factors that contribute to the development of obesity in this population.

A number of reasons have been put forth to explain the high prevalence of obesity among African American females: genetic predisposition (Kumanyika, 1994), higher energy intake (Burke et al., 1992), and reduced energy expenditure (Kumanyika and Adams-Campbell, 1991). A recent survey of African Americans suggested that the high-risk, high-fat eating patterns that contribute to the high prevalence of obesity-related medical hazards during adulthood are established during childhood (Johnson et al., 1994). Yet, during childhood, African American females are no more likely to be obese than nonminority females. In fact, the weight discrepancy between African American and white females does not widen until adolescence (Kumanyika, 1987). Therefore, by identifying factors that affect the adoption of high-risk eating behaviors during childhood, we may prevent increased rates of obesity during adolescence. One possible factor is culturally sanctioned heavy body image ideals.

Body image is one's perception of current body size. A body image ideal is one's desired body size. The body image ideals adopted by African American females (Rucker and Cash, 1992; Rosen et al., 1991; Harris et al., 1991; Collins, 1991; Wilson et al., 1994), may be connected to the high-risk behaviors that lead to obesity in this population. Body image studies suggest a relationship between the development of heavier vs. thinner ideals during childhood and the prevalence of specific eating disorders during adolescence and adulthood. For example, normal-weight white girls whose ideals are thinner than their images during childhood and adolescence (Collins, 1991; Wilson et al., 1994), are at greater risk than African American females for symptoms of anorexia and bulimia during adolescence and adulthood (Nevo, 1985; Gray, Ford, and Kelly, 1987; Rucker and Cash, 1992). Conversely, normal-weight African American females, who have heavier ideals than white females during childhood and adolescence (Col-