

RACIAL INFLUENCES ASSOCIATED WITH WEIGHT-RELATED BELIEFS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN AND CAUCASIAN WOMEN

This study examines African American and Caucasian women's perception of how race affects their weight. Structured focus groups that used the nominal group technique (NGT) were conducted with four groups of African American women ($n=30$) and four groups of Caucasian women ($n=30$). Participants generated responses to the question, "How does being a Black/White woman affect your weight?" The African American groups generated 48 unique ideas, including unhealthy food preparation, poor food selection habits, lack of exercise, stress, increased risk of chronic diseases, and associated medical costs; the Caucasian groups produced 32 responses, including distorted expectations of perfect body type, success depended on thinness and beauty, social pressures, media, and men's preferences. Results suggest that the African American women focused on food choices and health consequences while the Caucasian women emphasized body size and aesthetics. The observed differences support a need for culturally specific interventions that promote good eating patterns and healthy body shapes. (*Ethn Dis.* 2007;17:1-5)

Key Words: African American, Caucasian, Culture, Nominal Group Technique

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INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of overweight and obesity is increasing among Americans, including a disproportionate number of African American women, with an estimated obesity rate of 50% for African American women compared to 30% for Caucasian women.^{1,2} Many lifestyle behaviors are associated with obesity, including unhealthy eating habits and insufficient physical activity.³ However, less is known about sociocultural beliefs and attitudes that may promote or mitigate weight trends, particularly as they relate to African American and Caucasian women.

The sociocultural influences that might have an affect on weight-related behaviors (eg, weight fluctuations, rationale for weight change) and rates of obesity for African American and Caucasian women are likely very distinct. With regard to desires for thinness, research suggests that weight concerns (eg, fear of being overweight, body image dissatisfaction, low self-esteem) and disordered eating (eg, anorexia, bulimia, binge eating) are frequently higher among Caucasian women than African American women; however, the reasons for these differences are unclear.^{4,5} Furthermore, many Caucasian women tend to perceive themselves as overweight (ie, report an ideal body size lower than the perception of their actual body size), while obese African American women have been shown to underestimate their body size, which suggests the self-perception of being underweight.^{6,7}

Differences also exist in the effects of socioeconomic status on obesity by race. Evidence suggests that body mass indices (BMIs) are higher among individuals with low education and low income.⁸ While African American and Caucasian women of low education levels have a similar mean BMI, Lewis et al⁹ showed that African American women with moderate or higher levels of education had a higher mean BMI compared with Caucasian women. This finding suggests that despite higher socioeconomic status, African American women may engage in behaviors that promote a larger body size or have beliefs that perpetuate a cultural preference for heavier figures.

These unique racial patterns suggest that racial identity affects weight-related beliefs and is likely to play a role in determining behaviors and attitudes associated with weight control efforts. A number of factors influence women's perception of weight, including body dissatisfaction, family pressures, social norms, and aesthetic preferences.^{10,11} Understanding women's perceptions and mitigating ways of thinking is essential for overcoming barriers to change unhealthy weight patterns and its associated consequences.

Assessing and understanding the different racial perspectives that influence weight concerns is essential to effectively motivate women to achieve better health. For example, encouraging obese African American women to lose weight to decrease their risk of obesity-related chronic disease may be more