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Body Image and Weight Concerns among African American and White Adolescent Females: Differences that Make a Difference

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The paper examines body image ideals and dieting behaviors among African American and White adolescent females. Data are drawn from focus groups, individual interviews, and surveys. African American females were found to be more flexible than their White counterparts in their concepts of beauty and spoke about "making what you've got work for you." In contrast, many White adolescent females expressed dissatisfaction with their body shape and were found to be rigid in their concepts of beauty. Cultural factors which impact on weight perception, body image, and style are explored. Limitations of survey methodology for understanding cultural differences are discussed.

Keywords: ethnic beauty ideals, adolescence, body image, African Americans, Whites

Dissatisfaction with weight and inappropriate dieting behaviors are reported to be pervasive among adolescent Caucasian females. Survey research has suggested that there is an "epidemic" of dieting among White adolescent females (Rosen and Gross 1987) with estimates that as many as 60-80% of girls are dieting at any given time (Berg 1992). By contrast, research on African American adolescents suggests that these girls are less dissatisfied with their body weight and are far less likely to engage in weight reducing efforts than their White peers (Casper and Offer 1990; MMWR 1991). Explanations of such ethnic differences typically revolve around the statement that "cultural factors" are somehow implicated (Rosen and Gross 1987).

Utilizing data collected from a multi-ethnic study of adolescent females, this paper explores cultural factors which have an impact on weight perception, body image, beauty, and style. African American perceptions of beauty, characterized by informants as flexible and fluid, will be contrasted with White images which tend to be more rigid and fixed.¹ Ramifications of this difference will be broadly considered.

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Ethnic Differences in Perceptions of Weight and Dieting

Weight has been identified as an important health concern, source of psychological stress, and measure of self-esteem among White females (Attie and Brooks-Gunn 1987; Moses *et al.* 1989). Numerous surveys have documented the pervasiveness of dieting and body dissatisfaction among White adolescent females (Desmond *et al.* 1986; Greenfield *et al.* 1987; Koff and Rierdan 1991). In one study among White high school students, 80% of girls surveyed felt they were above the weight at which they would be happiest and 43% said they would like to weigh at least 10 pounds less (Fisher *et al.* 1991). Storz and Greene (1983) found that 83% of White adolescent girls they surveyed wanted to lose weight, though 62% were in the normal weight range for their height and gender.

Results of recent nationwide surveys have revealed that White and Hispanic girls perceived themselves to be overweight even when their weight for height fell within "normal" parameters as established by the National Center for Health Statistics. By comparison, African American adolescent females were found to be less likely to perceive themselves as overweight (MMWR 1991). Desmond, Price, Hallinan, and Smith (1989) contend that both African American and White adolescents maintain distorted perceptions of their body weight, but in opposite directions. Their study suggests that African American adolescents of normal and heavy weight tend to perceive themselves as thinner than they actually are, while White adolescents of thin and normal weight perceive themselves as heavier than they actually are. Such studies call attention to differences in standards of acceptable weight and their variability across cultures.

A study conducted by Casper and Offer (1990) found that

African American female adolescents were less preoccupied with weight and dieting concerns than White adolescent females. In an item by item comparison, African American adolescents had fewer thoughts about dieting, were less fearful of weight gain, and had a less negative valuation of overeating. Rosen and Gross (1987) concluded that African American girls were more likely to be engaged in weight gaining than weight loss efforts when compared to their White and Hispanic counterparts.

Differences in cultural standards for acceptable weights have been reported both among adult women as well as among adolescent females. Using a structured interview technique, Rand and Kuldau (1990) assessed the prevalence of obesity and self-defined weight problems in a large sample ($n=2,115$) of African American and White women. Almost half (46%) of African American women in their study ($n=306$) were overweight by an average of 25 pounds, an amount which exceeded the average of all other groups. Significant differences emerged when acceptable weights by race and age were considered. Younger White women (aged 18-34) who considered themselves to have "no weight problem" were thin and were an average of 6-14 pounds under the lower limit of the "ideal weight range." African American women of the same age category who reported "no weight problem" had an average (rather than thin) body weight. Acceptable weights for this group fell within the recommended weight range, but acceptance of "overweight" became more pronounced as women became older. At older ages (55-74), African American women who reported "no weight problem" were on average 17-20 pounds overweight. Kumanyika (1987) has noted that "controlling for socioeconomic status does not eliminate the obesity prevalence differences between Black women and White women" (1987:34).

Allen (1989), in a study of weight management activities among African American women, reported that although most of her informants had been overweight for years by biomedical standards, they did not perceive themselves to be overweight. Awareness of being overweight came from outside the immediate family—a social or health encounter. As Allen notes, these women had not evaluated their body size "in relation to the White ideal in the media but in comparison to other African American women who on the average are heavier than white women" (1989:17). Most informants did not define overweight as unhealthy. These findings are corroborated in a National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) which found that fewer African American women than White women considered themselves overweight, even when they were by actual weight.

Kumanyika, Wilson, and Guilford-Davenport (1993), drawing from a sample of 25- to 64- year old African American women ($n=500$), found that about 40% of the women in the overweight categories (based on BMI) considered their figures attractive or very attractive.² Almost all of these women recognized that they were overweight by biomedical standards. Furthermore, only half of the women who were moderately or severely overweight reported that their husband or boyfriend was supportive of their dieting efforts. Almost unanimously, overweight women reported that their body size had not been the source of difficulties in their personal or family relationships.

Anorexia and bulimia are estimated to affect 2-3% of the White population. To date, few cases of anorexia and bulimia among African American females have been reported in the literature. A comparative study of bulimia among African American and White college women found that fewer African Ameri-

can women experienced a sense of fear and discouragement concerning food and weight control than did their White counterparts (Gray *et al.* 1987). Researchers have suggested that the cultural milieu of African Americans offers "protective factors" against the development of eating disorders. Such factors include family and community appreciation of a fuller and physiologically healthier body size and less emphasis on physical appearance as measured solely by one's weight (Root 1989). There has been some concern, however, that increased affluence and acculturation of African Americans into White culture may result in higher incidence of eating disorders as African Americans seek to emulate White middle class ideals (Hsu 1987).³ Silber (1986) has suggested that professionals misdiagnose eating disorders among African Americans due to stereotypical ideas that such problems are restricted to White women.

Beyond considerations of weight, several researchers have noted that women of color are compelled, at various points in their lives, to compare their appearance to the dominant White ideal. Such comparisons extend beyond body shape to hair and skin color (Gillespie 1993; Lakoff and Scherr 1984; Okazawa-Rey *et al.* 1987). Okazawa-Rey, Robinson and Ward (1987) have argued that the African American women are twice victimized and in "double jeopardy" because they must respond to the desires and expectations of African American men and to White cultural values and norms.

Research conducted up until the last decade tended to highlight the self-contempt some African Americans feel about their appearance as a result of the hegemony of the White beauty ideal.⁴ Researchers have recently pointed to the manner in which African American women are supportive and appreciative of one another's efforts to fashion a positive identity in a proactive and aggressive manner (Cross 1991; Okazawa-Rey *et al.* 1987⁵). Little research has focused on the lived experience of African-American adolescent females and the extent to which conflict about appearance affects their lives in various social interactional settings.

Survey research suggests that there is greater satisfaction with body weight and less dieting among African American than among White adolescent populations. This does not mean that African American adolescent females are less concerned about their appearance than are their White counterparts. At issue here is: *what type of self presentation is culturally valued by African American females, in what context, and for what reasons.*

To date, little research has focused on African American females although issues relating to self presentation of males has been discussed. Research on African American males suggests that one coping strategy adopted to deal with oppression and marginality has been "cool pose" (Majors and Billson 1992). Animation marks African American style expressed verbally, non-verbally, at the site of the body, and through a wide range of performance (Fordham 1993). Cool pose is a "ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength and control" (Majors and Billson 1992:4). According to these authors, cool pose empowers black males in their daily lives by helping them stay in control of their psychological and social space. "Styling" provides an individual voice for males who might otherwise go silent and unnoticed.⁶

While Majors and Billson (1992) do not specifically discuss African American women, other researchers (Fordham 1993) have noted the importance of styling and *ad hoc* construction of

a gendered self in an environment where style is both valued and commented upon. The existing literature does not address how African American adolescent girls negotiate their identities and relate to their bodies in a variety of settings. Toward this end, the present study examines African American perceptions of weight and beauty in a Southwestern city marked by ethnic diversity and a geographically diffuse as distinct from centralized African American population. African American and White adolescent females' attitudes about appropriate body size and dieting are contrasted to highlight important differences between these groups.

Methodology

Data for our analysis are drawn from a three-year longitudinal study (the Teen Lifestyle Project) on dieting, smoking, and body image among adolescent girls. Two hundred fifty girls were recruited into the study while they were in the 8th grade (junior high) and 9th grade (senior high school). Informants were 75% White, 16% Mexican American, and 9% Asian Americans. In the final year of the project, a second sample of 46 African American adolescent girls, drawn from grades 9-12 and other community groups in the same city was added to the study. Both the White and African American participants in the study were from a range of lower middle to middle class families. Similarity in socioeconomic status between girls in the two ethnic groups precluded analysis of body image and dieting behaviors by social class.

Data collection during the study took place primarily in four schools and community organizations. Each girl in the study participated in one in-depth semi-structured interview each year. Each interview took about 45 minutes and was conducted in the school. In addition to individual interviews, focus groups were also conducted with groups of four to five girls on issues regarding perceptions of beauty, ideal body shape, and dieting practices. Ethnographic techniques enabled the researchers to gather data on the natural language of teens and the meaning of beauty, body, and dieting references in context. Interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed and entered into Notebook II software to permit retrieval of quotations on particular topics. Individual interview and focus group data were analyzed through thematic analysis.

Each participant in the study completed a survey questionnaire each year on a range of issues including body image, eating, and dieting behaviors. Questions on the survey were derived from the literature and from issues which emerged as salient to this adolescent population during interviews. Culturally appropriate response categories were also drawn from ethnographic interview data (Nichter *et al.* 1994). Height and weight were measured at the time of each survey.

Our study of African American adolescent girls utilized both ethnographic interview and survey methods. Ten focus group discussions with 4-5 girls per group were conducted by African American researchers in order to identify the perceptions and concerns that African American girls held about their weight, body image, dieting, and other broader health and lifestyle factors. Focus group discussions averaged about one hour in duration. These discussions were followed by individual interviews with several key informants. Two surveys were administered to the African American participants. The first survey was the same as that given to the larger multi-ethnic sample. The second sur-

vey was designed specifically for African American girls based on issues generated in interviews.

The research team consisted of both White and African American researchers. Focus group and individual interviews were transcribed, read, and discussed by members of the research team. Cultural differences and similarities which emerged from the data were analyzed in weekly meetings among the authors. Later, a panel of community members were asked to comment on findings.

Results

TEEN LIFESTYLE PROJECT SURVEY RESULTS. In this section a comparison will be drawn between responses to the Teen Lifestyle Project survey (year 3) collected from the sample of White, Hispanic, and Asian-American girls (n=211) and African American girls (n=46). Responses show distinct differences with regard to the issue of satisfaction with weight.⁷ In response to the question, "How satisfied are you with your weight?" 70% of the African American informants responded that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their current weight. While 82% of these girls were at or below the normal weight for height range for African American girls of their age, 18% were significantly overweight (above the 85th percentile).⁸ Only 12% of girls who were normal weight expressed dissatisfaction with their present weight (see Table 1).

Among Whites, results of a survey question about satisfaction with body shape revealed that almost 90% of these informants expressed some degree of negative concern about their body shape. Dissatisfaction with body weight and shape among White girls, even when their weight/height ratio is normal, has been continually confirmed in the literature (Fisher *et al.* 1991; Storz and Greene 1983).

Despite the differences in body satisfaction expressed by African American and White girls, responses to survey questions on weight control behaviors reveal few significant differences between the two groups. This was initially puzzling for the researchers. In response to the question "How often have you tried to lose weight during the past year?" 48% of African American

TABLE 1: How Satisfied Are You With Your Present Weight? Responses of African American girls, age 14-18 (n= 44)⁺

BMI	Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied	Total
Low *	25%	25%	25%	25%	10%
Mid**	4%	11%	71%	14%	72%
High***	14%	57%	29%	—	18%

+ Forty six girls responded to the survey, but two girls did not supply information on their height and weight. Thus, the n of the table is 44.

* Low BMI indicates girls below the 15th percentile of BMI.

** Mid BMI indicates girls who were above the 15th and below the 85th percentile.

*** High BMI indicates girls above the 85th percentile.

These are drawn from NHANES I data for African American girls (Must *et al.* 1991).

TABLE 2: How often have you tried to lose weight during the past year?

	haven't tried	1-2 times	4-6 times	once a month or more	always trying
White (n=211)	39%	28%	14%	9%	11%
Black (n=46)	48%	30%	6%	4%	11%

girls stated that they had not tried to lose weight, as compared to 39% of White girls. Approximately 30% of girls in both ethnic groups had tried to lose weight one or two times in the past year. In both groups, 11% said that they always dieted. No significant differences between White and African American girls emerged (see Table 2).

In response to the question "Are you trying to change your weight now?" 54% of African American girls said they were trying to lose weight as compared to 44% of White girls. No significant differences emerged between ethnic group responses (see Table 3).

Data derived from this survey seemed contradictory. While African American informants seemed similar to White informants with regard to dieting practices, they expressed much greater satisfaction with their weight than White girls. Why did these African American girls report trying to lose weight if they were satisfied with how much they weighed? During discussions among project staff and a panel of African American youth, several issues emerged:

Did answering questions on a survey primarily designed for a White population mask differences in attitudes and behaviors of African American girls?

To what extent were their answers shaped by the questions asked and the context in which they were asked?

Was it plausible that the language of the survey indexed dominant cultural values?

Would language which engaged African American girls yield different responses?

Did this African American sample have characteristics which would lead them to adopt forms of behavior similar to White girls?

Were their friends mainly White girls and did this influence their practices and attitudes?

Members of the research team expressed concern that the survey results from the African American girls did not reflect differences in body image and perceptions of self expressed during focus groups and individual interviews. In the next section, data are presented which highlight cultural differences identified during ethnographic interviews and focus groups. Data will also be presented from a second survey designed specifically for African American girls. This survey employed language and addressed themes which emerged from key informant interviews and focus group discussions. A series of juxtapositions between White and African American adolescents with regard to beauty and thinness ideals are presented.

BEING PERFECT: BEAUTY IDEALS AMONG WHITE ADOLESCENTS. Females, particularly those who are White and middle class, are

TABLE 3: Are you trying to change your weight now?

	No	Yes, I'm trying to gain	Yes, I'm trying to lose
White (n=211)	51%	5%	44%
Black (n=46)	39%	7%	54%

socialized through a host of influences from the media to fantasy play with Barbie dolls to believe that slenderness is essential for attractiveness and is a key component for interpersonal success (Freedman 1984; Hawkins and Clement, 1980). Many adolescent females strive for the bodily perfection depicted in the media, believing that they are somehow inadequate in comparison to the American ideal. As Freedman (1989) has noted, the adolescent search for a personal identity has been distorted into a search for a packaged image.

The ideal, "perfect" girl was often described by our White informants as being 5'7" tall and between 100 and 110 pounds. She was usually a blonde and her hair was long and flowing, "the kind you could throw over your shoulder." Descriptions mirrored those of fashion models: "I think of her as tall—5'7", 5'8", long legs, naturally pretty, like a model's face with high cheekbones." To many informants, the ideal girl was a living manifestation of the Barbie doll. The researchers were continually struck by the uniformity of descriptions of the ideal girl, regardless of what the speaker herself looked like. This led us to conclude that there was a prototypic, ascribed standard of beauty that girls struggle to achieve. The attributes of the ideal girl were encapsulated by the word "perfect." This sense of beauty was fixed: fixed on the pages of magazines, fixed on the airbrushed faces of models, and fixed in the minds of our adolescent informants.

For the vast majority of girls, "being perfect" was an unattainable dream which led to a devaluing of their own looks and a sense of personal dissatisfaction and frustration. This was particularly striking when informants were in junior high school and their bodies were undergoing rapid change. Some girls described their practices of bodily concealment in an effort to hide their bodies. As one girl explained:

I just want to look like one of those models in the swimming suits when they walk on the beach—like a flat stomach, little hips, little waist, and skinny thighs, so you don't, like me, have to put on the shorts and the shirt and the sunglasses.

In focus group interviews, girls were asked to describe what kind of attributes made another girl's life seem perfect. One girl answered, "I don't know. Their friends and their attitude, their looks and their weight." Another girl in the group elaborated on the weight issue:

Well, they're not like malnourished or anything, I mean they look healthy. I mean, you don't look at them and say, 'Oh my God, they're too skinny' or 'Oh my God they're too fat.' They're just perfect.

Interviews revealed that the right weight was often perceived as a ticket to the perfect life. The girl with the perfect body who

can "eat and eat and eat and not gain anything" was described as being "perfect in every way." By extension, the girl with the perfect body has a perfect life: She gets the boy of every girl's dreams.

Most girls buy *Seventeen* magazine and see all the models and they're really, really skinny and they see all these girls in real life that look like that. They have the cutest guy in the school and they seem to have life so perfect...

Girls, particularly in junior high school, described how being thin was a prerequisite for popularity. Girls equated being thin with being "totally happy" and noted "how being skinny makes you fit in more." Many girls thought that boys wanted them to be thin. As one girl said "Guys always say they don't want big chunky girls, they want skinny, slim girls."

DIETING AMONG WHITE ADOLESCENT FEMALES: AN ATTEMPT TO ACHIEVE PERFECTION. To many White adolescents, achieving the thin body ideal was viewed as the key which opens the door to success, popularity, and romance. In group discussions, girls talked about wanting to lose weight. They spoke of dieting not just as a way to become thinner, but as a way to gain control of other aspects of their lives. This logic was explained succinctly by one high school girl:

...if I went on a diet, I'd feel like it was a way of getting control...like a way to make myself thinner, and make my appearance, and my social life better. So it would be like getting control over lots of different things I guess.

Dieting, a mode of producing a more perfect thin body, held the promise of control over one's present and future. A thin body constituted symbolic capital having exchange value for popularity. As one girl noted:

I think the reason that I would diet would be to gain self-confidence...but also that self-confidence I would want to use to like get a boyfriend. Do you know what I mean? It seems like that's the only way that I would be able to...to be accepted.

For many White girls, talking about body dissatisfaction and the need to lose weight is a strategy for establishing group affiliation. It reproduces a model of, as well as a plan for, achieving a more perfect life. Drawing on focus group and individual interview data from the Teen Lifestyle Project, Nichter and Vuckovic (1994) explored the commonality of the expression "I'm so fat" among adolescent girls. This discourse, which they term "fat talk," was commonly used among White informants to express dissatisfaction with themselves as well as a broad range of other negative feelings. "Fat talk" was also used to maintain group affiliation and served as a leveling device: in order to be part of a group, a girl had to express some degree of dissatisfaction with herself. Calling attention to one's physical imperfections afforded girls a sense of belonging with those who shared similar concerns.

Analysis of interview and survey data revealed that although talk about body dissatisfaction and the need to diet is pervasive, this does not always result in actual sustained dieting behavior among White adolescent females. Quantitative data analysis confirmed that more girls engaged in "watching what they ate" as a strategy to maintain their weight and to be healthy than were actually dieting (Nichter *et al.* 1994). "Watching what you eat" was usually defined as "eating right, like eating a lot of

fruits and vegetables and avoiding junk foods." A thin, toned body was clearly identified as a symbol of being healthy by White adolescent informants.

COMPETITION AMONG WHITE GIRLS. Ironically, White girls who were closest to the image of the ideal girl were admired, but at the same time were the object of envy and dislike. The perfect girl provokes frustration for other girls, sometimes to the point where these girls feel their own efforts are futile:

You just see all these older girls, like when you go to the mall, and there's like, it's like, "why was I born?" because they're so perfect.

Despite the desire to be perfect, a White female who is extremely attractive may find herself shunned by her female peers, as she represents all that her peers are not and aspire to be. Adolescent girls as well as boys scrutinize and evaluate her "reified parts" and envy is gained at the cost of self-alienation (Goldman 1992). Some informants noted that when they saw a beautiful girl at school, in the mall, or even on television, they would label her a "bitch." Since the perfect girl's flaw is not visible, it is assumed to exist in her personality. As one girl noted:

Girls, they completely stare at another girl. If a new girl would walk in I would like notice every single flaw and then I'd wait for her to make me happy—I mean show me that she is really okay and then I kind of blow off her flaw, but until then I'm like "god do you see that big thing between her teeth...do you see how much makeup she's wearing?" I like have to know everything...If she is really pretty, then I want to see her flaw...all of it. All of it. I want to know every single part of her flaw.

Not uncommonly, girls would state that they hated this girl, despite the fact that they didn't know her. Some girls remarked "I want to hurt her" or "I feel like killing her."

Comparing themselves to other girls and failing to measure up to self-imposed standards of beauty made some girls feel bad about themselves. As one girl noted, "A lot of times I envy other people and then I start to feel bad...that I'm ugly or something." Rather than accentuate the positive aspects of their looks, many White girls expressed a desire to alter their perceived imperfections in order to achieve the ideal.

USING WHAT YOU'VE GOT: BODY IMAGE AND BEAUTY AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS. African American perceptions of beauty are markedly different than White perceptions despite frequent media images of African American models and dancers who depict White beauty ideals. In focus groups, African American girls were asked to describe their sense of an ideal girl. Commonly, girls responded with a request for clarification: Were we asking about an African American ideal girl or a White one? This response signaled to the researchers that the girls were keenly aware of differences in ideals of beauty between the African American and the dominant White culture.

This was confirmed in the second survey administered to African American girls in which they were asked whether there was a difference between their ideal of beauty and that of White girls. Sixty three percent of the girls agreed that there was, while the rest reported that there was little difference. In response to the open-ended question "If yes, what is the difference?" girls wrote comments such as: "White girls have to look like Barbie dolls and Cindy Crawford to be beautiful", and "White girls want to be perfect." African American girls noted that "their

attitudes and the way they wear their clothes is different" and that White girls "want to be tall, be thin and have long hair."

When the researchers asked African American girls for their description of an ideal African American girl, their response often began with a list of personality traits rather than physical attributes. The ideal African American girl was smart, friendly, not conceited, easy to talk to, fun to be with, and had a good sense of humor. Many girls noted that their ideal girl did not have to be "pretty," just "well-kept" (i.e., well-groomed). In terms of physical attributes, girls tended to respond by calling attention to an ideal girl having it "going on." This indexed making what they had work for them: long nails, pretty eyes, big lips, nice thighs, a big butt—whatever. The skin color of the "ideal girl" was described as dark, medium, or light depending on the skin color of the respondent.

What was particularly striking in African American girls' descriptions, when compared to those of white adolescents, was the deemphasis on external beauty as a prerequisite for popularity. As one girl noted:

There's a difference between being just fine or being just pretty...because I know a lot of girls who aren't just drop-dead fine but they are pretty, and they're funny, all those things come in and that makes the person beautiful. There are a lot of bad-looking (physically beautiful) girls out there, but you can't stand being around them.

Girls were aware that African American boys had more specific physical criteria for an "ideal girl" than they had themselves. They commented that boys liked girls who were shapely, "thick" and who had "nice thighs". One girl noted that "guys would be talkin' about the butt...it be big." Another girl explained:

I think pretty matters more to guys than to me. I don't care. Just real easy to talk to, that would be the ideal girl for me, but the ideal girl from the guy's perspective would be entirely different. They want them to be fine, you know what guys like, shapely. Black guys like black girls who are thick—full figured (laughs).

African American girls were notably less concerned with standards for an "ideal girl" depicted in the media. What emerged from interviews was a sense of self esteem which led several girls to describe the ideal girl in terms of themselves—not someone "out there" to be emulated. As one girl noted:

...the ideal girl? That's me. I don't know. I'm happy with the way I am. My friends like me the way that I am and they don't think that I should change and neither do I.

Beauty was not described in relation to a particular size or set of body statistics. Girls noted that beauty was not merely a question of shape. It was important to be beautiful on the inside as well as on the outside, and to be beautiful a girl had to "know her culture." One girl explained that "African American girls have inner beauty in themselves that they carry with them—their sense of pride." This sense of pride was commonly described as a legacy they received from their mothers.

We asked girls to describe what kinds of qualities they admired in a Black woman. Girls noted that they admired a woman who "keeps her self up and acts like herself" and "is strong on the inside, knows what she wants, and looks good on the outside and inside." One girl explained that a beautiful Black woman is "a woman who accepts who she is but yet can stand up for herself, and a woman who truly believes in herself, works hard

and doesn't accept negative things in her life that will bring her down." Having a positive attitude and "not worrying about your looks too much" were important components of a beautiful woman. Attitude eclipsed body parts as a measure of value.

In focus group interviews we asked girls if they heard or engaged in much talk about being fat with their friends.

I don't hear that a lot. I hang out with black people and they don't care—we don't worry if we're fat because we'd all be drawn away from that. We want to talk about what's going on, you know, about where we're going for lunch. We're not concerned with that.

We asked girls what they would do if a friend did complain about being fat. One girl responded in the following manner: "I'd tell her 'Don't think negative. People who think negative aren't gonna get nowhere'."

Standards for body image and beauty among these African American adolescents can be summed up in what these girls term "looking good." "Looking good" or "got it goin' on" entails making what you've got work for you, by creating and presenting a sense of style. In a recent article on body size values among White and African American women, Allan *et al.* (1993) similarly report that "looking good" among African American women is related to public image and overall attractiveness rather than to weight. Adolescent informants explained that regardless of a girl's body size or shape, height, weight, skin color, hairstyle, etc., if you can clothe and groom yourself and have the personality to carry off your personal style, you are "looking good." "Looking good" had to do with projecting one's self image and confidence—having "tude" (i.e. attitude), and "flavor." "Throwing your attitude" entails establishing one's presence, creating a "certain air about yourself," being in control of your image and "things around you," being able to improvise effectively, and maintaining poise under pressure. "Flavor" refers to the sensual dimension of one's presence beyond gross physical appearance.

African American perceptions of beauty are flexible; they include, and go beyond, physical characteristics. In the second survey administered to African American girls, they were asked to select one of several possible answers to complete the statement "In my opinion, beauty is..." Almost two thirds (63%) of these girls responded that beauty is "having the right kind of attitude and personality when you deal with others." Thirty five percent of girls responded that beauty is "making what you got work for you in your own way." Only 2% of our sample noted that beauty is "making yourself look as close as possible to an ideal body shape and face."

Another theme which emerged in discussions with African American informants was that beauty is fluid rather than static. Beauty is judged on the basis of "how one moves" rather than on what one weighs. Participant observation with African American girls and women trying on clothes and looking in the mirror revealed a greater tendency for these women to move with the clothes being tried on than to strike a series of static poses, a behavior more typical of White women. The importance of movement and body language has likewise been noted with reference to Black English. Speicher and McMahon (1992:391) discuss how their informants described style in conversation as a means of projecting self. As one woman noted, "When you're trying to get your point across, there's style, there's movement, there's a

lot of moving". Another informant described Black English as a "very interactive form of language" noting that "it has to do with eliciting an audience's response, not just an audience's listening and understanding, but very much a visceral response, a physical response." The emphasis was as much on how you moved and the sense of style that was projected, as what was actually said.

STYLE AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS: USING WHAT YOU'VE GOT. Style is appreciated and commented upon by peer group members. "Putting it together" entails creating style that not only fits one's person, but projects an attitude. African American girls in the study were far less likely to purchase ready made "looks" off a rack or to derive identity from wearing the label of a particular brand. The wearing of brand name clothes and recognizable styles was a major identity issue among adolescent White girls, especially in junior high school.¹⁰ Economics, as well as the cut of clothing (most ready made clothes are fit for a Caucasian body), affected African American girls' efforts to create a style. While brand names continued to be recognized as a sign of status, brands did not dominate African American girls' fashion statement. Style demanded that resources once marshaled be tailored, adapted, and appropriated. Brands did not create distinction in and of themselves.

Creation of a style "which works" involves making a personal statement and projecting a unique presence. This presence reflects not only on one's person, but on the African American community at large. As Taylor (1982:61) notes, style is a domain of life strongly linked to ethnic pride:

Black style is our culture. It's our collective response to the world. Our style is rooted in our history and in knowledge of our inner power—our power as a people. Black style is the opposite of conformity. It's what others conform to. In fact, quiet as it's kept, our style is envied and emulated throughout the world.

Beginning in early adolescence, an African American girl is encouraged to develop a look which "works" given her own physical endowments and her social and economic environment. In a context in which the beauty standards of the larger society are often the antithesis of African American physical attributes (facial features, body shape, body size, and hair), positive feedback from other members of the African American community is important. This feedback is essential given the constant barrage of ideal standards from the dominant White culture and negative stereotypes generated about African Americans (Gillespie 1993:75):

For who among us has not at some point in time succumbed to the propaganda, looked in a mirror felt ourselves to be wanting? Wanting because our skin is too dark, or our noses too wide or our hips too large, or because our hair wouldn't grow and never blew in the wind, or just because we never seemed to measure up.

How an African American female is valued within her family and community will determine whether she does or does not succumb to this constant assault on her person.

African American girls in the study reported routinely receiving compliments from other African Americans of both genders for "looking good" and "having it going on." Compliments were received from people of close as well as casual acquaintance, in public as well as in private, as a matter of course with-

out any offense taken. Interview data strongly suggested that African American girls received far more positive feedback about how they look from their families and friends than negative feedback. At the same time, however, they are taught to maintain their composure in verbal battles (such as playing the dozens) in which one's opponents attempt to exploit areas of potential sensibility and vulnerability. All in all, however, African American girls reported receiving far more positive feedback for creating their own style around their given attributes than did White girls who received support for altering their looks to fit established beauty ideals. Support for dieting was commonly articulated by White girls but rarely mentioned by African American girls. Allan *et al.* (1993) confirm these findings and note that African American adult women in their sample were influenced by friends and family to maintain a larger body size.

POSITIVE FEEDBACK AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS. Juxtaposed to the envy and competitiveness which mark White girls' comments of others whom they perceive to be attractive, African American girls described themselves as being supportive of each other. In focus groups, girls talked about receiving positive feedback from family members, friends, and community members about "looking good."¹¹ This is consistent with Collins (1989:762) who noted that in traditional African American communities, Black women "share knowledge of what it takes to be self-defined Black women with their younger, less experienced sisters." Collins further contends that there is a sisterhood among Black women in their extended families, in the church, and in the community-at-large.

On the survey designed for African Americans, we asked girls what their response was when they saw a girl "who's got it going on"—a girl who has put her personal resources and attributes together. Almost 60% of our informants noted that they would "tell her she's looking good," while another 20% of girls noted that they "would admire her but wouldn't say anything." Only 11% of girls noted that they "would be jealous of her." These findings stand in stark contrast to the earlier discussion about competition among White girls.

A girl's peer group serves an important function in her socialization among African Americans. Being the same age as other group members is not as necessary a prerequisite for group membership as it is among White girls. Broader based group membership and support contributes to flexibility in the way beauty and style is perceived and accepted. Groups do engage in surveillance, however, and hold members accountable for how they look, how they carry themselves, and whether or not they are "taking care of business." As one girl noted:

Other people, our peers like when they don't like what you have on they will tell you and if they like it they will say so ('that's fresh')...the white girls, oh whatever, they say 'that's nice' even if it's not, they will say it anyway.

BEAUTY AND AGING. Another difference between White and African American perceptions of beauty involves the manner in which age is represented. Age is represented as physical deterioration in the dominant White culture. Age is an enemy to be fought with vigilance through the use of wrinkle creams, dieting, and exercise programs, and when all else fails cosmetic surgery. Wolf (1991), citing interviews with editors of women's magazines, notes that the airbrushing of age from women's faces

is routine. Wolf contends that to airbrush age off a woman's face is to erase her identity, individuality, power, and history. With regard to adolescence, the lack of portrayal of adult White women as beautiful adds an increasing tension to achieve the beauty ideal during the teenage years.

Among African Americans less emphasis is placed on being young as a criteria for being beautiful. This theme emerged during focus groups and was queried on the African American survey. In response to the question "As women get older, what will happen to them in terms of how they look?" 65% of girls said that they would get more beautiful and 22% said they would stay the same. Only 13% of girls thought women would lose their looks as they became older.

For African American girls, beauty is not associated with a short window of opportunity as it is in dominant White culture. It may be achieved, maintained, and enhanced as one grows older and more sure of herself. The number of African American girls who spoke of their mothers as "beautiful" far exceeded White girls who tended to speak of their mothers either in terms of their youth ("when she was young..."), or as "alright for a mother," implying that as one became older, the possibilities of being beautiful were reduced.

ATTITUDES TOWARD DIETING AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS. Beauty work is closely tied to dieting in dominant White culture. Among African Americans, dieting carried less significance. On the African American survey we asked girls to complete the statement "For your health, is it better to be...." Responses included "a little overweight" or "a little underweight." Sixty four percent of the girls thought it was better to be "a little overweight," while the remaining 36% chose being "a little underweight" as a response. In the same survey, girls were asked to respond to the question "For people who are normal weight or underweight, I think dieting is...." Responses indicate that 40% of girls thought it was "okay if you want to do it" while 42% thought dieting was "harmful to your body." Only twelve percent of girls thought it was "good because it puts you in control of your life."

During interviews with African American girls, most agreed that dieting was appropriate for someone who was "very overweight." "Very overweight" was defined in focus group interviews as "someone who takes up two seats on the bus." Some girls noted that harming the body through dieting was a sin in as much as one's body was God given. Notably, informants who reported dieting behavior on surveys, articulated a different set of cultural values related to dieting and body image in focus groups and individual interviews.

SELF-ESTEEM. In addition to one's peer group, the African American family and community are sources of positive feedback that serve to enhance self-esteem and supplant negative comments directed against individuals from outside (Barnes 1980). African American children, especially those in lower socioeconomic groups, are taught by their parents to function in and deal with an oppressive and hostile society in which they are expected to survive and excel (Ladner 1971). Children are raised with the knowledge of "how it is." Parents teach their children that resources may not be available to them, but they can succeed if they learn to "make what they got work for them."

During focus groups, African American girls expressed a greater acceptance of their physical bodies than did White girls as well as a sense of self and style based on making what they

had work. Rather than reaching for an abstract ideal, these girls talked about achieving their own personal ideal. As one girl noted:

I think that Black people, Black kids, we're all brought up and taught to be realistic about life and we don't look at things the way you want them to be, or how you wish them to be. You look at them the way they are.

Acceptance of self is also a message girls take home from the church. African American parents must prepare their children to understand and live in two cultures. W.E.B. Dubois wrote in the early 1900s about the idea of a double consciousness: "Blacks have to guard their sense of blackness while accepting the rules of the game and cultural consciousness of the dominant white culture" (1903). To achieve the former, children are raised to be part of an African American community as well as a member of an African American family. For many African American women, this entails developing a spiritual self which becomes "the greenhouse in which a woman can nurse her self-image and build her self-esteem" (Lewis 1988:64). In Christian spiritual belief, one's body is conceptualized as the temple of the holy spirit. In many communities, the church is one of the places where one's sense of style is displayed and appreciated.

Conclusion

Existing studies have identified cultural differences in body image and weight control behavior among adolescents of different ethnic groups. They have not, however, explored reasons underlying such differences. In this article, the authors point out differences in the conceptualization of beauty and style which influence how White and African American adolescent girls perceive themselves and relate to others around them. Two distinct ideologies have been contrasted that are articulated at the site of the body. While these ideologies coexist, they have an impact on White and African American women in different ways.

The ideology of advanced capitalist society is reproduced at the site of the body through the mode of working toward bodily perfection. This task engages the imagination of not the lives of a majority of young White women in America. This ideology has promoted critical assessment leading to dissatisfaction with one's physical attributes, fostered competition and envy among women, and encouraged the pursuit of goals impossible to obtain/maintain (Nichter and Nichter 1991; Gaudin 1992). In a multicultural nation, the idealized beauty of White culture has been valorized and a multitude of products made available to women of color promising "melting pot" success in the form of products which help one pass/blend in mainstream America.

A second ideology, propagated within African American culture, is built around egalitarian ideals, the principle of reciprocity, and the recognition of strength and balance in diversity (Fordham 1993). Fostered is an approach to life where improvisation is valued and identity is constructed through creativity and style. Writing about the ways in which knowledge is transmitted between mothers and daughters in an African American community, Carothers (1990:239) notes:

Daughters learn competency through a sense of aesthetics, an appreciation for work done beautifully...This aesthetic ~~ability~~ becomes one of the measures of competently done work as ~~perceived~~ by the women themselves and by other members of their community.

African American girls learn from their mothers and through interactions with their peer group and community that they can project an image and attitude of power through the way they dress and carry themselves. Competency is required in knowing how to present oneself in bicultural contexts ranging from the school and street to the church and job market.¹² In focus groups, girls continually noted the importance of style not only to project an image of themselves as individuals, but in their role as representatives of the family and African American community.¹³

One way in which lessons about freedom, competency, and community are learned is through aesthetic appreciation in African American culture. Beauty is defined less in relation to static images and more in terms of performative competence in a multicultural world marked by conflict as well as egalitarian ideals. In contrast to a more static image of beauty as bodily perfection, a more fluid, flexible image of beauty prevails. Instead of competition which fosters envy and alienation, an egalitarian ethos is promoted, marked by mutual appreciation, cooperation, and approval of someone "whose got it going on."

Several researchers (e.g., Collins 1990; Stack 1974; Valentine 1978) have noted that American racial-ethnic communities have developed collective social strategies that contrast with the individuation of the dominant culture. Among African Americans, creating one's own style as an individual statement is important, but equally important is a positive presentation of one's community. An egalitarian ethos does not imply the absence of hierarchy nor the absence of historical tensions and interpersonal power struggles that form part of daily existence (Fordham 1993)¹⁴. What it does imply is that individuality, while respected in the form of personal style, attitude, and improvisation, is also encompassed by sociocentric values.¹⁵

A review of the Teen Lifestyle Project focus group and individual interview data identified striking differences with regard to body satisfaction and notions of ideal body shape between African American and White adolescent females. African American females were far less rigid in their concepts of beauty than their White counterparts and spoke more positively of "making what you've got work for you". While both White and African American girls articulated the importance of developing one's own style, White images of style were built around a more restricted set of beauty ideals. This led most White girls interviewed to express dissatisfaction with their bodies, especially in terms of their desire to lose weight as a way to "be perfect" and popular.

While talk about feeling fat was pervasive among White girls, reported dieting attempts rarely resulted in sustained weight loss behavior. Dissatisfaction with weight (and consequently with one's self) and talk about feeling fat was discovered to be a culturally appropriate way for girls to show that they were concerned with their bodies and that they were working toward an ideal of perfection (Nichter and Vuckovic 1994). This contrasts with the African American ideal of "making what you got work for you" which pays greater credence to individual difference. The first ideal is reflected in how women measure up on the scale and strike a series of static poses in front of the mirror. The second ideal is reflected in women who move in front of the mirror in order to see if they "have it going on" and who pay less attention to scales and decontextualized measures of perfection.

Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, and Ward (1990:100) contend that African American women are becoming increasingly proactive in their negotiation of identity:

Rising above externally sanctioned characterizations of womanhood, some black women are fashioning their identities based upon an analysis and understanding of their own struggles and successes. Further, Black women have united to support one another's efforts in the creation of newly defined roles and identities. Within this dynamic of self-determination, the black woman is proactive rather than reactive, aggressive rather than passive, and assertive rather than receptive.

Many of the African American girls interviewed during the Teen Lifestyle Project expressed positive feelings about their bodies and their sense of style. Their responses may well reflect egalitarian ideals and play down internal conflicts which may emerge in contexts where positive feedback is not forthcoming. It remains to be seen whether they will be able to maintain these self-perceptions as they become older and obtain jobs in mainstream American society. As Root (1989) has noted, increased opportunities are available to women of color, particularly those who can operate in ways that conform to the norms of the dominant White culture. Middle class African American women may be more likely to deemphasize their black identities in order to get ahead, and may be particularly vulnerable to the message of dominant White society that "thin is everything" (Villarosa 1994). For example, Bordo (1993) claims that African American women are as likely to have disturbed relationships with food as all other women. For evidence of this, she points to African American magazines which have an increased number of articles on weight, dieting, and exercise issues. The extent to which hegemonic values articulated in popular magazines are ignored and/or resisted by individuals or groups of women bears consideration. Entering the mainstream job market may increase pressure for women of color to be "perfect" in order to counteract negative racial stereotypes. Will this translate into body discipline in the form of dieting to obtain a thin body by girls who aspire to make it, or will preexisting and/or postmodern sensibilities alter the way in which beauty and success are perceived in this community?¹⁶

A final note on project methodology is in order. The initial Teen Lifestyle Project survey administered to a multi-ethnic, but largely White, population of adolescents did not reveal pronounced differences in perceptions of beauty, body image, or weight management between White and African American girls. These differences only emerged when a culturally sensitive survey was constructed following ethnographic research and administered by African American researchers. Two lessons were learned. First, survey instruments on body image and weight control designed largely for White populations mask important differences that exist between African American and White girls. Second, performance on such surveys by African American youth attending predominantly White schools reveals more about their bicultural competency than the way in which they think about beauty and body image. Because questions asked in the initial Teen Lifestyle Project survey did not address issues relevant to African American girls and because the survey was administered in a space associated with dominant White cultural ideals, responses tended to conform to those expected of the dominant population.

Follow-up research in the African American community of a sprawling Southwestern city revealed that adolescents expend considerable time and energy negotiating a sense of style in contexts where they are on display to their peers. The dominant White beauty ideal was clearly recognized, but did not play an influential role in negotiating identity. Similar studies need to

be carried out in other regions and "school cultures" within America to ascertain the degree to which the findings of the present study are generalizable.

NOTES

¹ Our use of the terms African American and White is an heuristic. We do not mean to infer that either a monolithic African American or White culture exists. The depiction of cultural ideals related to weight and body image presented in this article is drawn in broad strokes so that differences in orientation may be discussed. We are aware that these differences are cross-cut by class considerations and that cultural heterogeneity exists.

² An issue that has been raised is whether Black-White differences in bone-size, body proportions, and frame can affect measurement of African American women. Kumanyika (1987) suggests that these errors are not significant, and in any case, would affect African American women after adolescence.

³ A concern about affluence and anorexia deflects attention away from eating problems as women's struggle against a "simultaneity of oppression" (Clarke 1982; Naylor 1985; White 1990). These researchers suggest that eating problems in the African American community constitute responses to oppression, being undervalued and overburdened at home as well as in the workplace. Thompson (1992) notes that eating problems begin as coping strategies against traumas ranging from sexual abuse to racism.

⁴ See Cross (1991) for a critique of early studies of group identity preferences and self-esteem that were based largely upon pre-school studies.

⁵ The extent to which African American consciousness has affected self-esteem associated with physical appearance has been the subject of little research (Smith, Burlew, and Lundgren 1991).

⁶ To our knowledge, a comparable literature among White males does not exist.

⁷ For this analysis, a comparison is drawn between the longitudinal sample (largely White) and the African American sample. Although it would be useful to separately consider ethnic differences among Hispanic, Asian American and White adolescents, it is beyond the scope of the present article.

⁸ Classification of girls into these categories was done by computing BMI from height and weight measurements. BMI was compared to normal values for African American girls based on NHANES I data (Must *et al.* 1991).

⁹ Limitations of the present study should be noted. First, the region in which the study was conducted has a small African American population. It would be important to explore the same issues in a community which was largely African American. Second, informants in the present study were drawn from a range of lower- to upper- middle class families. Social differences in weight related attitudes and behaviors need to be examined within samples drawn for this paper. Third, the study was conducted in the Southwest where housing among African Americans is scattered as distinct from being centralized. Future studies should be conducted in areas with a higher population density in the African American community.

¹⁰ White girls in junior high school were more label conscious than their counterparts in high school. It is important to note that White youth are also involved in the creation of style (McRobbie 1989) which may take the form of symbolic repression of commodities as a mean of actualizing opposition and resistance (Hebdige 1979, 1988). Irrespective of differences in the ways in which White adolescent girls dress based upon the clique to which they belong, a thin body ideal is maintained (Nichter and Nichter 1991; Nichter and Vuckovic 1994). Hegemony carried out at the site of the body coexists with acts of resistance and attempts to express individual identity. The body is an immediate, proximate terrain where social truths and contradictions are played out and

agency expressed (Scheper-Hughes and Locke 1987). It is a site of sensuality and creativity as well as domination and struggle, a medium of expression affected by a confluence of meanings flowing from a variety of life spaces.

¹¹ It has been observed (Abrahams 1975) that African American society involves a highly flexible and personalistic approach to interaction. The expressive or personalistic, rather than the instrumental or institutional, dimension of role validation is stressed. Respect must continually be earned and negotiated. In this context, smart talk and body language are important and a competitive spirit is encouraged within the home as a survival skill (Ward 1971). Given this pattern of interaction, positive feedback about one's looks is perceived far to exceed negative feedback by adolescent girls.

¹² Collins (1989) has described how knowledge of how to behave is essential to the survival of the subordinate.

¹³ A crucial part of African American aesthetics involves doing their own thing while contributing to the overall sense of the whole (Abrahams 1975).

¹⁴ The egalitarian ethos found in contemporary African American "communities" is, in part, the result of an externally imposed lack of differentiation between "Black peoples" associated with enslavement.

¹⁵ African American scholars writing on management styles and organizational environment have repeatedly drawn a distinction between Eurocentric and Africentric perspectives of social organization (Ak'bar 1984, Asanti 1988, Baldwin 1986, Nobles 1980, Schiele 1990). The Eurocentric model places emphasis on group and system survival which views the individual as part of a collective wherein horizontal communication and affective ties within the group are high. The virtue of the Africentric approach is its flexibility in responding to turbulent changes in the environment (Daly 1994). As distinct from a Eurocentric model of organization, where emphasis is placed on the "the correct way of doing the job," an Africentric approach places greater emphasis on raising group consciousness of where problems lie and a consideration of alternatives that may work given a set of contingencies. This parallels our discussion of the value of "making a look work for you" and "community feedback" about one's sense of style and aesthetic as a reflection on self as well as community. Researchers of African American child socialization have also laid emphasis on the way children are taught to bear individual burdens (self-suffering) as well as to adapt for the good of kin as a sign of strength and character (Higgenbotham and Weber 1992).

¹⁶ While it is important to recognize the ways in which the bodies and voices of women of different ethnic and class backgrounds are influenced by material forces in society (Martin 1990), it is also necessary to challenge the extent to which such influence is totalizing given pre-existing dispositions (physical as well as cultural), situated knowledge, and fractured identities (Haraway 1991). Following Jameson (1981), it seems prudent to examine cultural aesthetics as a sedimentary genre. Every new appropriation of a genre to express contemporary realities passes through the sedimentary layers of its previous appropriations.

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