

## **Racial Identity and the Development of Body Image Issues among African American Adolescent Girls**

**Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber**

Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, USA

**Stephanie A. Howling**

Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, USA

**Patricia Leavy**

Stonehill College, Easton, Massachusetts, USA

**Meg Lovejoy**

Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA

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*This study focuses on the impact of race, and its intersection with gender, in influencing and/or preventing the development of disordered body image. Specifically, Black samples are examined to see the role that racial identity plays in the process of developing such attitudes. Using qualitative data analysis methods rooted in grounded theory, the study finds that race is intrinsically linked to the notion of self-esteem, non-internalization, and maternal support, and that in turn these factors serve to prevent the African American sample from the development of body image dissatisfaction. Key words: African-American, Adolescents, Body Image, and Racial Identity*

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### **Introduction**

The female body is a cultural artifact, defined and redefined over time in response to broad cultural and historical transformations. Historically, this body has taken on a tubular and slender form in eras in which the female mind has become more politically, economically, and socially independent. One need only reflect upon the popular image of the 1920s flapper and the 1970s fashion models to observe the validity of such an assertion. Ironically, when women are "demanding more space" in terms of equality of opportunity, there is a cultural demand that they "should shrink" (Hesse-Biber, 1991, 1996; Wolf 1992). The demand for weight loss thus becomes the social byproduct of political gain.

This notion of the body as a historical canvas gains further impetus when intersected with economic forces. Not only have the more recent cases of body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders been a reflection of the many cultural and historical transformations aimed at profiting from and maintaining the subordination of women (Foucault, 1977; Martin, 1987; Michie, 1987; Turner, 1984), but they have also been a reflection of the ways in which capitalism and patriarchy have sought to reap monetary benefits from this gender oppression. The food, diet, and fitness industries, aided by the

media, have systematically convinced women that independence means self-improvement, self-control, and the duty to achieve the ultra slender body ideal. Furthermore, because this ideal is so unrealistically thin, the American 'body industries' have gluttonously consumed immense profits by feeding insecurities and starving bodies. For as confidence in one's body decreases, the sale of low-fat foods, diet pills, and exercise bikes increases. Women are literally buying into this 'Cult of Thinness' (Hesse-Biber, 1996) and the promise of perfect lives for those with perfect bodies.

Yet what many body image experts have failed to acknowledge is the way in which these capitalistic and patriarchal notions of beauty affect women within different racial/ethnic groups. Their research has focused exclusively on the experiences of White women, assuming that their behaviors and attitudes are universal to all women regardless of ethnicity. The reason for this elitist representation is multifaceted, but at a fundamental level can be attributed to two overriding factors.

First, the initial data and literature on eating disorders, particularly that of anorexia nervosa, were grounded in studies conducted with White European and American females (Mintz & Kashubeck, 1999; Powell & Kahn, 1995; Silber, 1986; Striegel-Moore & Smolak, 1996). A second element contributing to the overrepresentation of Whites in body image analyses is the fact that both early and present day studies were conducted primarily in clinical settings (Gard & Freeman, 1996; Harris, 1995; Robinson & Andersen, 1985). This provides a bias on both race and class levels, as only the wealthiest patients can afford clinically based treatment. Yet even when African American eating disordered patients do have access to health care, they often go mistreated and misdiagnosed simply because physicians fail to recognize that differing racial groups can contract what is perceived to be a White women's illness (Osvold & Sadowsky, 1993; Root, 1990; Thompson, 1992).

Comparing body image dissatisfaction among White and African-American women and adolescents is increasingly becoming a part of research agendas (Atlas, Smith, Hohlstein, McCarthy, & Kroll, 2002; Botta, 2000; Chandler, Abood, Lee, Cleveland, & Daly 1994; DiGioacchino, Sargent, & Topping, 2001; Falconer & Neville 2000; Harris, 1994; Molloy & Herzberger, 1998; Nielsen, 2000). This racially diverse research is however often conducted on college students thus diminishing the interaction of social class with other aspects of positionality. There is also a growth in research on ethnically diverse populations including White, African-American, Hispanic and Mexican American groups (Abrams & Cook-Stormer, 2002; Altabe, 1998; Chamorro & Flores-Ortiz, 2000; Demarest & Allen, 2000; Goodman, 2002; Lopez, Blix, & Gray, 1995; Poran, 2002). This research often indicates that body image disturbance, particularly with regard to thinness ideals, is more of a problem for white women. Some research concludes that African American women and adolescents are, overall, more satisfied with their bodies than are their White counterparts (see Greenberg & LaPorte, 1996; Harris, 1995; Powell & Kahn, 1995).

These findings provide a red flag for body image researchers. It is imperative that we examine the phenomena occurring within the lives of African Americans that serve to shield its members from the development of body image dissatisfaction.

This paper thus seeks to uncover the factors which seem to prevent African Americans from developing distorted body perceptions. While numerous body image studies have sought to determine what causes individuals to develop body disorders, this

analysis takes a unique opposite perspective in looking to determine what conditions and attitudes prevent certain individuals from these disorders. Moreover, this paper adds a unique contribution to the discussion of body image by looking at the intersections of race, gender, culture, and when possible, class. In particular, we examine how African American female identity is tightly tied to their positive sense of racial identity. Gender identity becomes shaped through its interaction with their race and culture to produce a different sense of gender identity that challenges dominant white culture's definition of womanhood. This knowledge helps fill a gap in our current social scientific understanding of body image disturbance.

It comes to a concrete understanding of these intersections by using a unique grounded theory, qualitative approach which allows the girls studied to reflect upon their own experiences, identities, and cultures in order to come to a more salient understanding of the individual experience within our social world. There is a cautionary to heed as we pursue these research questions.

It's important to acknowledge that differences in the prevalence or rates of occurrence of eating disorders among individuals or social groups, does not mean that they may not be at risk. Williamson (1998) warns of the danger in taking too seriously the notion that some groups, particularly African American women, are "protected" from eating problems. In fact, Thompson (1996) explains that a multiracial feminist perspective conceptualizes eating issues as problems, versus "disorders", and shows how they are often the survival technique employed by women who are coping with sexism, racism, and/or homophobia. As such, she argues that in some instances women of color may be more vulnerable to eating problems, not less. Experts have slowly abandoned the notion that body image concerns are 'white women only' issues.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

Seventy-eight African American girls, represented in 32 focus groups and 9 one-on-one in-depth interviews comprise the sample for this study. Subjects ranged in age from 9 to 18 and came from working class or low-income families. All subjects engaged in interviews on a volunteer basis and gave their written consent or written parental consent if age appropriate, to participate in audio-taped interviews. Participants were solicited from five community centers in the greater Boston area. All members of the community center were made aware of the study and any individual who was interested in participating in the study was encouraged to do so. Respondents were told that they would be asked questions concerning their experiences with body image as African American girls. All respondents were aware of strict rules surrounding the issue of confidentiality and could decline to answer any questions asked. Respondents were interviewed at one of the five community centers or at a New England university.

### **Procedure**

Open-ended one-on-one interviews (Berg, 2001) and focus groups (Morgan, 1996) conducted from 1995 to 1999 were employed as primary qualitative research

methods. These methodological procedures were conducted with the primary goal of identifying the perceptions and concerns African American adolescents held about their weight and body image. Focus groups were used in the first round of qualitative interviewing. Groups were small consisting of 2 to 5 members per interview. Discussions typically tended to last approximately two hours. Focus group interviewing was conducted as part of the overall grounded theory approach of this study. These group interviews were used to explore preliminary topics and to refine further questions and concepts. Based on responses elicited from the focus groups open-ended one-on-one interview questions targeting the areas of dieting, eating behaviors, self-esteem, and personality were asked of individual volunteers. Any girl who volunteered after their focus group session was interviewed on an individual basis. These individual interviews varied in length from one to two hours. The primary investigator conducted all interviews. The main researcher in this study was a White, professional female. It is possible that each of these characteristics had both positive and negative effects on the interview process. However this study adopts the perspective that qualitative research is a reflexive process in which both subject and interviewer are able to learn and share with one another based on both their commonalities and differences, and that diversity in the interviewer-interviewee in many instances leads to rich and provocative results (Edwards, 1990; Reissman, 1987). In this study we feel that the data collection process was significantly enhanced by the racial difference between the researcher and respondents. This difference, which everyone involved appeared to be consistently aware of, and the principle investigator was continually reflecting on, allowed the researcher many times to ask for explanations of terms, attitudes, and daily behaviors that were normative to the girls being interviewed. This fostered a richness and depth to the transcript data and thus serves as an example of how difference can create a space for the production of data in qualitative research—particularly, understanding and naming what is otherwise taken-for-granted knowledge about social life. In this vein you will note during data analysis that we highlighted an instance where the respondents verbally articulated their racial difference with the researcher which lead to a rich description of what, to them, was a normative part of hair-care.

This study employs longitudinal and qualitative data collection techniques as opposed to survey methodology. Respondents who volunteered were often interviewed numerous times over the course of several months, which allowed the girls themselves to discuss their feelings and experiences. It also allowed the interviewer to discuss, in depth, some detailed aspects of her life and lived experiences. This longitudinal qualitative approach thus made it possible to generate a grounded and culturally relevant understanding of the way in which issues surrounding body image impact, and is impacted by, the lives of African American adolescents.

### **Data Analysis**

Once transcribed, data was entered into HyperRESEARCH, a qualitative computer software program, (Hesse-Biber, Dupuis, & Kinder, 1990) in order to permit text retrieval and to facilitate data analysis. Through the use of HyperRESEARCH, entire interviews were coded, stored, and analyzed. HyperRESEARCH allowed us to quickly

code segments of text and then automatically retrieve the text segments of all interviews that were associated with a particular code.

A qualitative analysis of the data was carried out using a 'grounded theory' approach (Charmaz, 1995). Through the methods dictated by this technique preliminary analyses of the interviews were conducted as the interviews were being collected. Thus during, not solely after the process of data compilation, interviews were coded thematically within HyperRESEARCH and were reviewed, evaluated, and reevaluated through the process of memo writing.

Grounded theory is a methodology employed for the purposes of developing theory that is grounded in data as it is gathered and analyzed. Theory evolves during the research process through a continuous interplay between analysis and data collection. Generating theory and social research are thus two parts of the same process. Grounded theory is rooted in the perspective that data interpretations must include the perspectives and voices of the people whom they study. Grounded methods are inductive in that they start with individual cases and progress to develop more abstract conceptual categories to synthesize and understand patterns within data. Levels of abstraction are built upon the data and are checked and refined by gathering further data. The researcher derives their analytic categories directly from the data, not from preconceived concepts or hypotheses. They must then study the meanings, intentions, and actions of the research participants.

The first process in our grounded theory approach was to code the interview data. Coding is the link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data; it leads directly to developing theoretical categories. Initial coding was conducted in a number of ways. Line by line coding allowed us to build coding ideas for our analysis from the ground up without becoming wedded to a pre-conceived theoretical perspective. The next step in the coding process consisted of focused coding. Focused coding involved taking earlier codes that continually reappeared in initial coding and using those codes to sift through large amounts of data. It is less open-ended and more directed than line by line coding and is more selective and conceptual. Sometimes we moved directly to focused coding without necessarily doing line by line coding. Interviews were read in their entirety for emergent themes. Coding might start with an emerging theme such as "Attitudes Towards Weight" and the resulting coding would involve breaking this code down into its sub-codes or dimensions "Attitudes towards Weight" --appearance, "Attitudes toward weight"—"Idealized versus Actual weight", etc. Memos were written by the authors describing each major theme. As we engaged in focused coding we clarified our themes by examining all of the data covered and identifying the variation within and between the various themes.

Memo writing was the intermediate step between coding and drafting our analysis. Memo writing allowed us to sort data into topics and to define how categories are connected in the overall process. Memos are preliminary and unstructured. They were simply areas where we noted interesting ideas and excerpted interesting data. Memo writing lead directly to theoretical sampling. This sampling allowed us to collect further data and identify key issues in our research. Memo writing thus became part of both analysis and rigor. Memos were used to simultaneously analyze previously collected data as well as to drive our future research questions. As salient topics emerged from the memos, these ideas were explored through additional interviewing. Preliminary ideas extracted from the memo-writing process were evaluated, based on the interviews of

additional respondents. Memo writing and interviewing thus served as a reflexive and co-evolving process.

Through the use of grounded theory methods we were able to extract theory directly from the respondents' experiences. We were allowing the respondents themselves to drive the research and our findings. Through grounded theory, researchers no longer are disconnected from their subjects looking at their lives through a methodological microscope. Rather, we now can become translators presenting their experiences to the world in their own voice.

## **Results**

Body image issues, defined as concerns that individuals have about their bodies, manifest themselves in a multitude of ways including dissatisfaction with hair, skin, height, weight, or any other physical attribute. It is the intent of this study to examine the degree to which African American adolescent females expressed body image dissatisfaction and/or concern, and why such concern does or does not exist.

### **Body Image Satisfaction**

Body image concerns did not occupy a central place in the lives of the African American respondents. Although many did express an interest and concern with how they looked --particularly in terms of hair style and skin color-- the majority of African American respondents did not judge themselves in terms of their weight. They did not believe that as females they were valued solely on the basis of their bodies and not the merits of their minds. Factors contributing to body image satisfaction among respondents are discussed below.

### **Weight, Dieting, and Appearance**

We asked the girls to comment on a body figure scale consisting of 8 figure drawings that were lettered from "A" (very thin) to "H" (obese). These drawings were used to assess weight and body dissatisfaction and were drawn from Childress' et al. (1993) study of middle school students. Girls were asked to select the drawing that "looks most like you" and then to also select the drawing that "you would most like to look like." Most of the respondents seem to be satisfied with their weight despite tending to select figures describing themselves as a "C", "D" or even higher range which would be considered "overweight" by mainstream standards.

It seems that the ideal among this group tends to be a "C" while the typical perceived actual body size being a "D". It is also interesting that girls who were much heavier than their ideal did not tend to be bothered too much by this. Like Caucasian women, the black women in our sample wanted to be thinner than they were. However, current research findings on this issue note that these differences do not appear as large as those for Caucasian females (Abood & Chandler, 1997; Allan, Mayo, & Michel, 1993; Patel, 2001; Rucker & Cash, 1992). These research findings suggest that Black females appear less dissatisfied with their bodies than white females (Patel, 2001). Allan et al. (1993) suggest that Black lower social status females in comparison to higher status

Black females and white women (regardless of SES) select a wider range of "normal" and attractive body images.

Some figure shapes were seen as unacceptable and labeled "fat" rather than "thick." According to the girls being thick-- curvaceous with large hips, a rounded backside, and ample thighs--was seen as the most desirable body shape. Being so fat that you have no shape anymore was considered unattractive. Joy and her friends Sasha, Sharon, Pam and Tiffany explain the difference between "thick" and "fat":

Joy: Fat and thick are two different things.

Pam: When a girl is thick she has sturdy thighs...

Sasha: In the right places

Pam: It's not flabby stuff. A girl can have big arms but not be fat.

Joy: Guys want a big butt, big chest, and just stacked, they just want you to be very healthy.

Sasha: Big... beans and rice!

Joy: That's right!

Sharon: They don't want anybody who is real real skinny, that can't get up. They want you to be fat and thick and healthy.

Sasha: I mean not over flowing fat.

Sharon: They want like Queen Latifa, proportioned, proportioned in certain areas.

Tiffany: All they care about is big butt big chest and what's between the legs.

Sasha: 36, 24, 36

Joy: Yeah that's it, that's what you got to get.

They don't want skinny women?

Everyone: No! - They want a big booty?

Who would want a skinny woman?

Everyone: - On another planet (laughter)? - Go to another state, California (laughter)? - Go to the North East, way up there in Eskimo land (laughter).

Although many girls had been teased about their appearance as children (for being fat, for having big lips, for being too dark, about their hair or their height), almost all the girls expressed pride and/or satisfaction in their appearance when asked. Naomi's comments sum up these points:

Naomi: When I was little I used to go around asking my mother like you know, I used to get into some arguments when I was younger and the kids used to call me ugly, like the little boys so I used to go home and ask my mother, "Mommy am I ugly?" and she used to be like "no you're not ugly you're pretty." And I used to ask my father, "Daddy am I ugly, this little boy said I was ugly." and he was like "you're not ugly, he's just jealous, maybe he likes you." That's what they would say.... My looks don't bother me, it's just my personality. I wanna have a good personality and have people like me, if they don't like me for my personality or just because of my looks than they must be missin out on something.

Do you worry about your weight?

Naomi: No. I'm not skinny, I'm not fat, humungous, I might be in between.

How does that make you feel about yourself?

Naomi: I feel good about myself. I wouldn't want to be too skinny.

Is your appearance an issue for you, do you worry about it a lot?

Naomi: No not really. It depends on how I'm feeling, if I'm in a bad mood, well not really a bad mood but if I'm feelin kind a sad, I'll start wondering to myself "am I ugly?" I say that to myself, but daddy says I'm not ugly and people compliment me and say that I'm not a ugly lookin person, that I'm pretty.

Most girls in our sample have never dieted in recent years, although a significant proportion talked about having dieted as a child after being teased about size by peers. Weight is, in fact, often talked about as a "fixed feature" of one's body image not particularly subject to control or manipulation. Weight is often spoken of as a biological or God-given feature (e.g. - "If god made me to be this way, than that's the way I should be") and others indicated that they believe that body shape and size is a matter of metabolism, a feature one is born with and can do little to change. Lucinda talks about her weight in these terms:

Lucinda: I never felt that I had to go on a diet cause I was like my body the way it was. I never thought I was too fat never thought I was too skinny. I was always thought I was just right for me and even if I was overweight I wouldn't put myself through that.

Why?

Lucinda: Because I feel that if God didn't want my body like that he would never, he would never encourage me to eat. If he do encourage me, he would never encourage me to eat more than I would like. Umm he...I think that if he just like if he did not want me to eat nothing that he want my body to be a certain way that the way that he would have developed me. But he developed me to come out tall and I guess sort of chubby and big feet and I guess that's just the way he wanted me cause I think if he wanted me different that he would have made me in a different way.

How would he have made you?

Lucinda: Sometimes. Somehow would say my stomach was real real flat.

Umm huh. Is there anything you feel you should do about it or you think that would be going against something?

Lucinda: I just think that was like telling your body "Oh, I don't like you or umm o.k." Or, "I don't like you or something like umm I don't want you no more." I think that's like da umm pushing away your body to have like a new body like if you had a friend pushing away your friend and I don't wanna talk to you no more cause I got a new friend.

So how come some girls diet?

Cause some girls have I guess some girls have different opinions than me because some girls might think oh umm I want to diet, I think I look too fat, I think I need to fit into this dress that I saw at the mall and stuff like that.

Do you know any girls that diet?

Lucinda: Umm Umm. None of my friends diet because they all of us have the same opinion that we think we just right.

Unlike weight, appearance was seen as something which was not a fixed attribute, but which had manipulability and included the personality, the way you "carry" yourself, hairstyle and clothing. Looking good consists of accenting your best features. These girls stressed that different aspects of appearance have to be neat and in harmony with one another. One girl commented that accenting your positive features was the most important aspect of "looking good". This suggests that beauty is seen in a more dynamic and egalitarian light - as something attainable by every woman who invests some time and attention to her appearance. Several girls described very heavy women they knew who were popular and attractive to men, indicating that being fat was not necessarily a social impediment. This research is very much in support of Parker, Nichter, Nichter, Vuckovic, Sims, and Rittenbaugh (1995) findings concerning the Black community's standards for body image and beauty stressing the importance of "making what you've got work for you, by creating and presenting a sense of style" (1995, p. 108). Streigel-Moore and Smolak (1996) note that: "This cultural norm may serve as a protective function against white culture's 'tyranny of slenderness'" (p. 267).

How did it feel when you were growing up, did you worry about how you looked at all?

Cristal- No, not really.

Did you ever diet?

Cristal- No.

Did you ever look at yourself in the mirror a lot?

Cristal- Yeah (laugh).

What do you look at?

Cristal- To see if my hair is good (laughs)...

### **Factors which Protect African American Females from Body Image Dissatisfaction**

What elements of the interviews can lead us to decipher why African American girls are not overly preoccupied with their weight and appearance? We suggest that African American female's positive body image is linked to their positive sense of racial identity. The Black family, extended family and the Black community are critical players in this process in that they convey through their words and actions, a positive sense of Black identity to young girls which mediates the values and attitudes of the dominant culture concerning women's role and body image. Black girls' gender identity is shaped as it intersects with girls' race and social class positionality to produce a different sense of gender identity that challenges dominant white culture's definition of womanhood. Young girls receive positive emotional support from their mothers concerning their bodies and their ability to succeed in life through a process we label "internalized self assessment". Wider contextual factors within the Black Community/culture, from peers to extended family send specific messages to young women regarding their bodies that are in stark contrast to White Western norms of beauty.

## **Racial Identity and its Intersection with Gender Identity**

Among our sample being a black female is a "unique" identity compared with being "just" a female. Racism that young girls experience in the wider society serves as a catalyst towards the promotion of girls' Black identities. There appears to be a strong priority given to being Black before being female. Hill-Collins (2001) notes the fact that " While Black girls learn by identifying with their mothers, the specific female role with which Black girls identify may be quite different than that modeled by middle-class White mothers. The presence of working mothers, extended family, other mothers, and powerful community other mothers offers a range of role models that challenge the tenets of the cult of true womanhood." (2001, p. 44). The "matrix of race, class and gender oppression" in young girls' lives suggests that Black daughters must learn how to survive "while rejecting and transcending those very same structures "(Hill Collins, 2001, p. 45). Children learn that resources may not be available to them, but they can succeed if they learn to make what they have work for them (Parker et al., 1995, p. 108).

It was the predominance of their race identity interacting with gender which had a strong influence on girls' attitudes and experiences concerning being a female. When the girls were asked if there was a distinction in the way in which they spoke of being a female compared to being a "black female," they were quick to answer "Yes. "

What is it like to be a Black female? What do you consider yourself, Black first or female first or ...?

Everyone: Black first.

Why?

Cristal: Cause anybody can be a female, if you think about it...

Keyett: Not everybody can be Black.

Tasha: God made different races of females to determine what kind of female you are. If I was to say female, I'd be lost in the crowd some place, because God made darker females, lighter females, middle females. I'm a Black female. Therefore I consider myself Black before female.

Jen: You can all be female but you all can't be black. For me being black, I take pride in myself being black. There's a lot of stereotypes about females this females that...you have to look like this to be a female this and that.... females do this, females do that. Always be known as female. I want to be known as an individual. You can't categorize.....ok they say blacks do this, blacks do that. But if you look at Jen you can't say that. That's why I would rather be known as being black than being female. So I'd rather be a black female than female black.

Deb: Like they said, egg came before the chicken, the black came before the sex. Your father's black, your mother's black, obviously you know you're baby is going to come out black; you just don't know the sex yet. That's why a couple months later they ask do you want to know the sex of your baby. That's how I feel. You have to be black before you are a female.

Sasha: God made female.....

Deb: ...uh-oh, Noah and the ark....

Sasha: ...I consider myself black before female. Because if god wanted us to just be female, he wouldn't have created all these wonderful colors that we have in this world.

Michelle: I'd say black first, because I think black is good.... I don't know, that's what I'm used to being. Black female.

In describing what it meant to be a "Black female," they used words such as "strong, independent, smart, and caring." When asked what it meant to be "female" the conversation turned to the issue of "respect" and the idea that "men tend to respect females less" as the most common meaning for the word respect. A girl loses respect and may be labeled a "slut" if she is too eager to gain male attention by wearing provocative clothes or acting sexually provocative with men. Other issues identified with being female centered on categories one might typically associate with femaleness-- issues of pregnancy, marriage and having a sexual relationship. Gender identity did not appear to be tightly tied to weight issues. In their conversations with their significant others in their lives--- their mothers, fathers and peers, being female is not associated with attaining a thin body image. In fact, the girls went out of their way to make a distinction between themselves as Black females and the white girls they had observed in their schools and outside their communities. Some describe the clash between white and black females as a "culture shock."

Sasha- I can tell you what, how you change when you go from a black school to a white school cause I was born in Salem and it was a drastic culture shock, drastic. Tell me what happened?

Sasha- Like when I was first starting out there (White school), ya know white girls have the straight hair, and ya know and the thinness and stuff like that...

Helen: Them white girls are too damn stuck-up. Some white girls, I ain't gonna say all of them. They act so damn stuck-up. Like they want to be so damn cute they don't want to be fat. They think fat is a bad thing to be....I don't give a damn. I never was fat, I never was skinny....If I'm gonna lose weight I'm not gonna stick my finger down, I'm just gonna exercise....If a boy doesn't like us for who we are, we don't care....There is this one girl, I mean, she is nothin but bones, she is all purple and she don't eat nothin, you can see her bones and all that stuff, she is like skinnier than me.

Naomi: In my science there were three Metco (inner city children who attend white suburban schools) kids, I sit in the middle and one is here and one sits there and the rest of the class is all white kids except one Spanish boy and the white girls they sit there in the back of the room and they have their mirrors and their brushes and they're always flipping their hair and doing it and the science teacher is always like "can you put that stuff away ? " and they're like "sure", they put it away and then they're bending over behind their desk and still doing it. They're forever look'in in the mirror, the ones that are younger than me, I don't make-up but the kids in the seventh grade wear tons of make-up.....the metco girls don't, except one girl.....I can put my hair up, cause my hair is thick, and I can put my hair up in a pony tail and it'll stay up there and they're like, "I can't put my hair up there cause it won't stay and stuff like that" and it's like, its a big culture shock

and a double standard and stuff like that.

Sasha- Yeah, ya know cause like the white people have their own little things and their feelings about weight and black people have their own feelings about weight and when the two collide it's like a big drastic change....

### **Racial Identity, Self Esteem, and Body Image Satisfaction**

Evidence suggests that a solid sense of group identification fosters self-esteem (Striegel-Moore & Smolak, 1996) and that as racial self-esteem increases, personal self-esteem increases (Hughes & Demo, 1989). In many ways this increased self-confidence that arises out of a strong racial identity translates directly into an acceptance of one's body and appearance. Numerous studies have shown that a decreased global self-esteem is associated with bulimia, body dissatisfaction, and drive for thinness (Frederick & Grow, 1996). It has been observed that women who have difficulty maintaining a positive self-image may also be overly preoccupied with how others perceive them and may use their body and appearance as a domain in which to construct a socially acceptable self (Striegel-Moore & Smolak, 1996).

Self-esteem exists in a cultural context. Self-esteem varies on an individual basis in any given culture and/or society because it is mediated through status, role, and other culturally based variables. Self-esteem is thus a dialogue between culture, society, other persons, and oneself (Chatham-Carpenter & DeFrancisco, 1998), that varies as each of these components evolve. In a Eurocentric culture in which women are valued as bodily objects, self-esteem is intrinsically linked to appearance. Thus for those women who adopt a Eurocentric worldview, those women who relate heavily to their 'gender identity', it becomes inevitable that they will be trapped within the vicious cycle of weight and self-esteem. Negative self-esteem will cause body image dissatisfaction, which only perpetuates low self-esteem, and so forth.

The positive self-esteem images girls in our sample possess, do not reflect a Eurocentric approach to female self-esteem, but arise instead from the indirect effects of the Black consciousness movement of the 1960s. The movement, in addition to promoting racial self-esteem, has supported the theme of 'Black is Beautiful' and has encouraged Blacks to embrace their racial appearance and to reject the traditional White conceptions of beauty. In their study on Black consciousness, self-esteem, and physical appearance satisfaction, Smith, Burlew, and Lundgren reasoned that African American women who expressed a high level of Black consciousness subsequently felt more confident with their African facial features and in turn demonstrated a greater self-esteem (Smith et al., 1991), and thus were not at serious risk for the development of body image dissatisfaction.

The African American girls in our sample refrain from developing serious body image concerns because of an increased level of racial identity that is passed onto them by significant others in the Black community such as parents and other relatives. This increased sense of racial identity promotes the development of an increased sense of self-esteem. This heightened sense of self-esteem provides them the space to feel good about their bodies without feeling pressured to conform to the dominant culture's definition of beauty. Jackie, Naomi, Joy and Sasha's comments are important in this regard:

Jackie: .... it's all long been the mothers, or like the fathers telling the children that they are beautiful, they're wonderful because everyone is saying they aren't. So within your family you're getting that because I mean everyone else, you've just been on the bottom and so your parents have been encouraging you since way back when. And now it's just like it's the same thing. Like you build up yourself as you're growing up on what your parents are telling you and how, how special you feel. And that's how you turn out to be, as a person.

Naomi: I have a lot of self-esteem. I got it from my parents, my family, my brother and my sister....They listen to me, they listen to the things that I have to say and that makes me feel good - that some is paying attention to me. And they say that I am okay the way I am and they are proud of me and my friends love me. What does having high self-esteem mean to you?

Joy: It means not caring about whatever anyone else says, just worrying about yourself, loving yourself.

Sasha: It's like, my mother always reinforces where I came from and she never hesitates to tell me where I came from, so it's like I always have that to fall back on.

What did she say to you?

Sasha: You're black, once you go black you never go back, um, you are always going to remain black and so live it, be proud of who you are, don't let anybody tell you what you are and what you should be because I got a lot of that, ya know, you should be like this and you should be like that and I'm still getting it but with the background that I have I have the mentality to know who I am and I'm not going to change for anybody.

Overall, a large number of respondents expressed a very high level of self-confidence bordering on what we term high or even "super-charged" levels of confidence. Their supercharged responses ranged from "I like everything about myself" to "I love to be me". Other girls expressed a more restrained self-confidence, typically describing aspects of themselves that they liked, such as their intelligence, personality and/or their looks. Interestingly many if not most of these girls attributed their self-confidence to the support and influence of their parents, most typically their mothers and sometimes from their father and their friends. In fact quite often, girls responded to the question about how much a girl cared or was worried about her appearance by saying that they didn't really care what others thought about their appearance. Not caring about what others think about you, (or at least denying it), may be a common coping strategy these girls use to deal with racism from the larger society and/or teasing by peers which can be quite fierce at times. For instance one girl said her mother taught her to cope with vicious teasing from her classmates when she was 12 (who called her "pig lips") by focusing on feeling good about herself and ignoring their taunts.

A few of the girls expressed a mixed level of confidence about self in that they would at times feel good and down about themselves. A few of the girls expressed a poor sense of self and interestingly this was also manifested in expressions of negative body image.

### **Racial Identity, Non-internalization, and Decreased Body Image Concerns**

The Black community and its people are bound to a separate cultural value system in which they strive to achieve their own set of goals (Reid, 1988) and establish their own unique identity counter to that of the larger, dominating, White society. The Black community, as an oppressed group, must strive to develop its own sense of self-worth in the face of a larger society which seeks to devalue its accomplishments. Ruth Striegel-Moore and Linda Smolak (1996) probe this issue further stating:

Minority group members are well aware of racial stereotypes and negative evaluations of their group by others. However, individuals commonly dissociate themselves from these group evaluations. Thus, contrary to theoretical perspectives, these negative images tend not to be internalized. This protective mechanism probably diminishes the direct individual psychological effects of racism (p. 276).

Thus, in groups affected by racial discrimination a distinct practice of 'non-internalization' emerges. Simply stated, non-internalization is the ability of an individual to disregard the comments of others by ignoring, rejecting, and disbelieving them. Much like self-esteem, non-internalization among African Americans is a direct result of their increased racial identity.

The ability to practice non-internalization is something which is instilled in the culture's youth through a distinct socialization process (Comer, 1995). In her study of women in interracial relationships, Janette Faulkner describes what she terms the 'armoring' process in which interracial and minority children are taught to combat the negativity that they may receive from others by disregarding their beliefs and statements. Within the context of 'armoring', children are "taught how to ignore a stare, casual remark or physical gesture, and how to deal with direct verbal encounters and physical gestures" (Faulkner, 1983, p. 197). Thus it is imperative that Black children learn how to "ignore" the actions of others. They must disregard the attitudes of White culture and embrace the ideals of their African American community.

We argue that non-internalization serves as a direct barrier against the development of body image concerns. Internalization operates in a manner in which external social beliefs are adopted by the individual and therefore are perceived to be internal personal beliefs. When women internalize cultural beauty standards, they come to believe that such conceptions are their own. Women in the larger society believe that they personally value thinness, not that they have been instructed or even forced to value thinness by their social structure (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). By ignoring and rejecting the comments, attitudes, and opinions of the larger society, African American females are inevitably rejecting that society's notions of beauty. In their study on Black and White self-esteem, M. Rosenberg and Simmons (1972) argued that one's self-image arose not out of the conceptions of the majority of people one comes in contact with, but rather is based on feedback from significant others. This has a direct impact on our understanding of internalization and body image. By internalizing only the messages and opinions of their significant others, mostly other members of the Black community, African

American adolescent females internalize only their notions of beauty, not those of the larger society, even though such a society may be dominant and invasive in their lives.

Non-internalization may also act as a shield against body image concerns in that increased racial identity, and internalization of the positive values of a specific racial group, results in better psychological health. In a study conducted on racial identity, gender roles, and psychological well-being, Pyant and Yanico (1991, p. 320) found that those women who endorsed "pro-White/anti-Black attitudes" displayed more abnormal psychological and abnormal physical traits as well as negative self esteem.

We take a new approach in this study to understanding the phenomenon of non-internalization. We argue that internalizing White ideals of beauty thus leads not only to emotional trauma, but also to body image dissatisfaction. Those who internalize the White culture's messages of beauty are more likely to experience such dissatisfaction than those individuals who do not. Therefore, a positive identification in a non-White ethnic group acts as yet another shield, in addition to self-esteem, derived from a strong racial identity, which serves to protect against the development of body image concerns in African American females.

In our sample, the positive or negative attitudes the adolescents expressed towards their bodies, were related to whether or not they internalized the messages of society regarding beauty. Typically this type of response emerged in relation to questions about whether the respondent was worried about her weight or appearance or felt pressured to look or act a certain way by peers or media. Typically, respondents answered this kind of question with an assertion that they didn't care about what others think about them, or that they are only concerned about how good they feel about themselves, or some combination of the two. A substantial number of girls often spoke emphatically about not wanting to follow external self assessments of their bodies, instead, relying on their own feelings and self-assessments: "I don't care what others say, as long as I look good to myself, it doesn't matter what people say". We found a connection between one's tendency to internalize the comments of others and one's attitude towards one's appearance. The more likely an individual is to internalize the comments of others, the more likely she is to maintain a negative attitude towards her appearance. Pam's response is typical of the type of non-internalization of negative body image comments from the outside world:

Pam: When I was like 13 or 14, I used to wear a size 16/18. I was short and stumpy.

How did you feel about that?

Pam: I got made fun of a lot and whatever, but the way my parents brought me up was that you don't worry about what other people say about you...

So what is it about you that allows you not to worry about your weight?

Helen: Because I don't care about what people think about me.

## **Racial Identity, Maternal Support, and Decreased Body Image Concerns**

Mothers are a great source of influence for Black adolescents. Black mothers act as mediators between Black culture and the dominant culture, as such; it is their role to instill their children with coping mechanisms for the larger world (Carothers, 1990). Mothers thus teach their children to have pride in their racial identity, self-esteem, and to ignore the opinions of the wider world. These lessons can take both verbal and experiential forms, as children may learn from their mother's lectures or by observing the ways in which their mothers respond to racist and sexist encounters in their everyday lives (Greene, 1990). If children observe that their mothers can survive such experiences and feel pride in who they are, they too will learn to resist criticism and feel confidence in their racial identity.

In addition to indirectly influencing their children's body image attitudes by increasing their child's racial identity, self-esteem, and non-internalization, Black mothers also directly influence their daughters' attitudes towards their bodies. Research has highlighted the connection between a mothers' body image and her daughters' body image (Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1996; Pike & Rodin, 1991). Feminist theory argues that the development of eating disorders is linked to the mother-daughter relationship (Bordo, 1993; Chernin, 1985), and specifically to maternal negotiations of work and family relations. Just as these theories serve to explain why so many women are afflicted with eating disorders, they also serve as new proof as to why African American women are not as affected by eating disorders. African American women have always worked and have always been able to integrate career and family.

African American mothers mold their daughters into women through both lecture and example. In the instances in which the mothers teach their children to be proud of their race, to strive towards a career, and to feel confident being women, it is observed that the girls do not express body image dissatisfaction.

In our sample, mother's support was critical to their daughter's sense of body image. Mothers tend to be supportive of their daughter's size and appearance and girls often talk about learning how to cope with teasing from peers via their mother. Mothers often tell daughters not to listen to what others say about them, but rather to focus on their own standards or deciding what's best for them. This may be a necessary coping strategy mothers teach daughters in order to deal with the racism they know their daughters will encounter. This strategy may also be very effective in protecting these black girls from the obsession with weight and appearance that many white girls fall prey to. The code 'positive maternal support' was used to indicate experiences in which respondents indicated that their mothers encouraged their daughters' self-esteem, was accepting of her physical appearance, frequently complimented the child, and was understanding and compassionate towards their child's needs and desires. Accordingly, the code for 'negative maternal support' indicated experiences in which the mother consistently performed the converse of these behaviors. The greater the degree of positive maternal support that an individual experiences, the more likely she is to have a positive attitude towards her appearance. A majority of the sample with positive maternal support indicated a positive attitude towards their appearance.

Do you think you have high body-esteem?

Shamika: Yes.

Where do you get it from?

Shamika: I get it from my mother. She gives me a lot of encouragement.

Did your mother tell you about discrimination?

Natasha: She said everybody's different, don't worry about it. It's just you, you worry about yourself right now, just don't worry about everybody else, don't care what other people say.

So are we saying that our mothers are really the backbone of our self-esteem?

Everyone: Yeah.

Why the mothers?

Keyett: Because they teach us to be women.

### **Racial Identity, the Black Community/Culture, and Decreased Body Image Concerns**

Many of the girls in our sample noted that larger sizes were more acceptable in the black community/culture, and thus offered little criticism for bigger bodies. Although many girls described friends or relatives they knew who were "fat" in this way but who were still popular or successful in the community. Research in fact has supported the idea that Black females are heavier than White females. Streigel-Moore and Smolak (1996) note that data from several national surveys suggest that "...over a 19-year period rates of obesity appear to have increased to a greater degree among black women than among white women" (p. 266). They also note that these racial differences cannot be understood on the "basis of socioeconomic status alone; rather risk for obesity appears to be determined by multiple factors, ranging from genetic factors to cultural variables" (p. 266).

Girls often described their mothers as big or fat, although they often also expressed the belief that their mother or significant others were "still beautiful", or knew how to "carry" themselves. It seems that the threshold for what is considered "fat" is higher among these girls, and that being "fat" is also not as socially disgraceful or debilitating.

Deb: I see big, big women... they be beautiful. My godmother, she's probably bigger than that last woman right there (referring to the body image figure "E"), and she's pretty. She has a pretty face....

Michelle B: ...know how to carry yourself...

Deb: ...pretty haircut, she knows how to dress.....I think big women are pretty...

How come it is okay to be a size 15/16?

Naomi: Because, they are more concerned....

Safaydra: It has to do with the things that we eat.

Chantell: A lot of people know that they are thick and the things that they eat...They are not used to being around skinny people.

Naomi: It runs in the blood anyway. In your family, your mother is big, your father is big, and that is how you have been brought up, around big people, you are not ready to come out skinny.

Cristal: We eat more.

Naomi: Yeah we eat more.

As we mentioned earlier in the section on weight, appearance and dieting, many of the respondents stated that in the Black community an emphasis was placed on being 'thick' as opposed to being heavy. Because they viewed being thick as the ideal body type several girls stated that if they were to gain weight it would in no way affect them.

How do you feel Keyett? You're ten pounds [heavier] now, how do you feel?

Keyett: I feel fine. I feel on top of the world.

Come on now.

Keyett: No really, it won't make any difference, I may have to buy some new clothes and stuff, but, otherwise it's not nothing.

If you were to gain 10 pounds tomorrow, how would you feel?

Joi: I'd be happy.

Tasha: I'd just go on feeling, but I mean, I'd probably change my way of thinking, but if I feel comfortable with it I'll just adjust to it, there is nothing else I can do.

### **Influence of Black Males**

The overwhelming consensus among those interviewed was that their black male peers favored "thick" women (big thighs, big butt, small waist, and important but less so a big chest, e.g., an hour-glass figure with accentuated hips and butt). This must be a very significant factor in black girls assessment of their own weight, especially since most girls who were asked said they only dated black men or did not believe in cross-racial dating.

I'd like to know how you know what the guys want in a girl?

Everyone: (laughter) They talk, they tell us. They'll come right out and say it.

Can you tell me what they say?

Everyone: They say she has big buns... a girl will be walking down the street they be like she's stacked. She's stacked.

So you need to have big buns, big chest, how tall should you be?

Sasha: They want a shorty ... about Sharon's height.

Sasha and Sharon: About 5'4 5'5, my sneakers are giving me height.

Joy: I'm about 5'7.

Your about the limit.

Joy: 5'7, 5'8.

Have you exceeded the limit Tiffany?

Everyone: (laughter)

Tiffany: Yep!

What do the boys tell you?

Everyone: That she's taller than them.

Sharon: I think that they are intimidated by her, because she is taller than them.

Sasha: They say the girl can dunk on you.

I don't understand that phrase.  
 Sasha: That she is looking down.

Several focus group interviews were held with young men at the Community Center where Sasha, Tiffany, Sharon and Joy attended. These young boys were very clear about their preferences in the type of female they were looking for and it seems as if these young women were not far off from this description:

What do you find attractive in a girl?  
 Jason: She doesn't have to be a beauty queen but if she isn't nice.  
 Does she have to be thin?  
 Jason: No. Thick.  
 Doug: She has to be thick  
 Tyron: Not thin.  
 Doug: No Ethiopian.  
 Tyron: Black boys don't like skinny girls. I go to a white school and all the white boys in my school all they want is skinny girls with long hair and stuff like that.  
 Doug: She has to have big bones, she can't be skinny, it's not sexy, you don't want your girl wearing baggy jeans and she's all, ya mean, you cannot see nothing but, no, ah that's not, if she's moving you want, you want juggling stuff, not skin and bones.  
 Tyron: why do you think that white men want thin women?  
 Tyron: Girl- I don't know they're stupid (laughter).  
 Doug: Cause, they're corny, they are, for real, they're corny, skinny women, no offense to you all, but you can find some out there real skinny and their chest is like flat, their bra size can be like 2z.  
 Tyron: You mean A.  
 Doug: A or what ever, it's a disgrace, you cannot find no teenage girls out here where their chest are bigger than the older woman's, and these woman will be like 50 years old.

### **Appearance Dissatisfaction**

While the majority of the girls do not seem overly concerned with their body image, particularly their weight, they do seem to display a moderate degree of appearance dissatisfaction regarding their hairstyle and skin color.

### **Hair and Body Image Dissatisfaction**

Perhaps hair, more than any other physical attribute serves to exemplify the beauty struggles faced by African American women. On one hand, hair represents one's assimilation into the popular culture, while on the other hand, it can serve to reject all cultural norms surrounding beauty.

What makes someone 'Whitewashed'?  
 Priscilla: The hair.

Alright so if you see her wearing her hair too White...

Priscilla: I'll tell her.

What will you say to her?

Priscilla: I'd say, 'Jackie, you're getting a little confused.

Right so when you say they're confused what does that mean? What do they do?

Jackie: Our hair is different than your hair. You need to do different things to it. And some [African American girls] just don't understand that. They think that their hair is White hair and so they can do whatever they want to it.

Like what do they do?

Jackie: Say for instance my hair is like the kind of texture that it is, washing it twice a day would kill it. But some people wash their hair everyday with Pantene.

What makes you have a high self-esteem and what makes it bad?

Teresa: I don't know what makes me have high self-esteem but I know what makes me have low self-esteem.

What's that?

Teresa: People make fun of you.

What do they make fun of?

Teresa: My hair

As the data indicates, hair becomes the symbol for the paradoxical worlds in which African Americans exist. It becomes a venue for displaying their place in both cultures. In this regard, hair that is straightened often becomes the compromise for African American women (Gregory, 1992; Leeds, 1994). African American women when styling their hair must attempt to do so as a means of verifying their roles in both Black and White cultures. Scholar Veronica Chambers (1999, 2001) illustrates this phenomenon by asserting that she has “two relationships with the outside world: One is with my hair, and the other is with the rest of me... Because I am a black woman, I have always had a complicated relationship with my hair (2001, p. 212).” The personal experience Chambers generalizes to the larger African-American female community also came through in our sample.

Jen: ...these days if you don't have your hair done people are going to laugh at you...because it's a part of life. You got to maintain your hair, your body, your clothing. You can't be going around looking like a bum.

Why is that? Is your hair more important than your weight?

Jen: For me it is yes. Because your weight is your weight. You were born with it, it's your metabolism. But your hair...God gave it to you but God gave it to you for it to be done. You shouldn't walk around with your hair all over the place because it doesn't look right.

How much time do you spend on your hair?

Jen: As long as it takes... to get my hair braided it takes six, seven hours.

Can you tell me what that's like?

Jen: Like they say you have to go through pain to have beauty, to get your hair braided you have to go through pain...She (HAIRDRESSER) takes some hair and she starts braiding it into your own and she has to make it thick to the edge so it won't come out. She has to braid it tight. It feels like someone hitting your head with a mallet...

Where do you think the idea for braiding comes from?

Jen: I don't know. They say it comes Africa but I really don't know.

What our data adds to pre-existing data on Black girls and body image is not only that hair is an important issue, but that hair is representative of a site of struggle between White and Black culture where girls' self-esteem and non-internalization of dominant White culture is called to the frontlines of body image battles. As a part of reflexive qualitative data analysis it is also important to note how issues of difference explicitly come to bear on the research process at this moment—everyone is acutely aware of this difference.

Do you spend a lot of time on your hair?

Michelle: yes.

Sasha: I know I do.

Jen: only when its straight enough to do something....

Deb: .....right.....

Jen: this mornings I threw some curls in it, got in the shower, got out and called it a day.

What happens when you go in the shower?

Sasha: shower cap.

Why do you have to wear a shower cap?

Jen: because we don't have hair like y'all. no offense but we just can't get ours....if we go in the shower, it depends....

Tell me what happens when you go in the shower.

Jen: when you first get a perm and you in the shower your hair still comes out straight, but if you wash your hair continually, like get your hair wet every every day...

Sasha: ...you'll get bald headed...

Jen: ....and you got a perm on Monday, it will be nappy, it will be an afro, we just can't get in the shower.

### **Skin Color and Body Image Dissatisfaction**

Another body image issue that affected the girls in our study was that of skin color. Among African American women, skin color is connected to feelings of self-worth, self-esteem, and attractiveness (Thompson & Keith, 2001). Research has found that most African Americans are partial to skin color that lies somewhere in the middle of the light-dark color spectrum (Clark & Clark, 1980; Robinson & Ward, 1995). This becomes particularly relevant for Black women in that often those who have darker skin feel devalued for not living up to the American standard of light skinned beauty, while those who have a lighter skin tone feel ostracized for being too light, which is synonymous for too White.

It has been observed that lighter African Americans fare better economically, vocationally, and educationally (Wade, 1996). Overall, their family income is 50 percent greater than that of darker Blacks and their personal income is 65 percent greater (Keith & Herring, 1991). In addition fair-skinned African Americans are more likely to be

employed in professional and/or technical fields, to be more educated, and to have spouses with more education and occupational prestige than are their dark-skinned counterparts (Keith & Herring, 1991; Thompson & Keith, 2001). Subjects in our study grappled with the issue of skin color and offered comments which were in accordance with the available literature.

Do people who are dark skinned want to be light skinned or do people who are light skinned want to be dark skinned?

Tasha: There is an old saying, the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice. It's an old saying but it's a double standard because some people think that if you are dark you are better or some people think if you are light you are better....

In what way?

Tasha: It goes back to slave times. If the slaves were lighter they were always one of the house slaves, and if you were darker you were in the fields planting cotton. That's how they get that the light skins are better because they were close to the house-master and you had more privileges. Now the dark skin people, they say that they are better because they are closer to their roots and the lighter you are the more White blood that you have.

What do the guys want?

Natalie: Good looks, long hair, light-skinned.

Jen "broke it down" for us when she explained what it means to be light-skinned or dark-skinned in her community and the concerns she has about what this means for her sense of self and relationships with the opposite sex. Her friends affirm this concern as well.

Jen: Let me break it down for you. Usually if I was walking down the street walking next to a light-skinned....alright, alright. Light-skinned blacks, usually light-skinned girls, have the lighter skin the long pretty hair....

Sasha: Straighter hair....

Jen: Closer to being white. Let's just put it like that. When they (THE BOYS) see a darker female, they are known as being real dark, nappy haired.

Deb: Bush baby.

Jen: Exactly, bush baby. Somebody like my complexion...

Sasha: Or my complexion....

Jen: If I was walking down the street with a light-skinned girl, she'd probably get first looks too. She'll probably get...eyes will turn on her first before they see me.

Black guys' eyes?

Jen: Exactly because she's light-skinned, pretty hair. Look at me, I got good hair. I need a perm, touch up, something, but you know....they would look at her first, even if my hair was done

Why is that? Why would they look at her first?

Jen: Because she's light-skinned. I mean a lot of black guys like light-skinned

girls.

Michelle: My brother does.

Sasha: My friend Richard...he will sit here and say I love me some dark-skinned girls, and there are a lot of people that like dark-skinned girls, a lot of people like light-skinned girls, a lot of people like middle, in-between.....

Michelle: ....or any....

Sasha: ...exactly, or any. All of the above, whatever they can get.

But is it a general thing, the lighter the skin the more attractive? What do you think?

Jen Yes but the same thing goes for girls too. I can think about myself.

Can you tell me a little more?

Jen: I went through this phase when I did not like anything but light-skinned boys.

Deb: I hate light-skinned boys.

Michelle: I don't like light-skinned boys.

Sasha: Yellow boys are conceited.

Jen: I'm trying to tell y'all, it was a phase; I was going through a phase where I would not look at a brown-skinned boy. Just light-skinned. I mean not light-skinned when he's completely white, but I mean light-skinned, nice hair, I used to be in love with them. But then it was funny, most of the light-skinned boys with pretty hair, had nice hair. They knew that they looked like that... has nothing to do with acting white. They just knew that they were too cute. They thought that they were just too cute. You just couldn't give them a compliment. I'd be on the phone with so and so, I'm not going to say no names, so and so, "you know you look good." He would say "yeah, I know." I'm like let's go out. He says "I have to go get my hair cut." I thought you, nothing's wrong with your hair, I saw you yesterday, you just got haircut two days ago. "I need another one." Oh, ok. We'll be chillin'; I'll go out with him. We'll be downtown. Worse place you could ever take a person, a boyfriend especially because everybody and their momma walking down town....I was with this certain boy, light-skinned, I thought I was the bomb because he looked good. We were walking downtown all girls' eyes on him. This girl came up to me "you better keep a leash on your man" and I didn't even say anything to her. She started staring at him; he was staring at her back. He knew he looked good, he knew he looked good because every time a girl walked by him, they'd say damn he looks good. And he'd look back.

Jen: Dudes around my way, they'll look at a few light-skinned girls, like hmmm, she looks good but when they start to know her, they'll come back to me and be like I just want to hit it. She's too high on herself.

Do you think light skinned girls have high self-esteem?

Jen: When we talk about self-esteem, we're talk about self-esteem to a level where you can control it. When you have self-esteem, its good to be proud of yourself, know your this, know your that, know what you can do and what you can't do. But when you get to the point where you think you're better than everybody else, that's not self-esteem...

Jen: You are just being plain old conceited. You can have self-esteem and say "oh yeah, I look good," but once you get to the point where you say I look better

than her, than therefore that's not self-esteem.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

We find that the African American girls in our study do not experience weight dissatisfaction in the same manner as girls in the dominant White culture. Black girls grow up in the shadow of the dominant White culture; their experience concerning their bodies is filtered through the prism of race as well as gender and for the girls in our sample, the effects of living in a poor community. Their racial identity intersects with their gender identity to create a different social reality which in fact serves to protect them from dominant cultural standards of beauty. Because they have higher levels of self-esteem, they do not internalize the negative comments of others concerning their body image, and receive positive maternal support and the support of the wider Black community. Increased racial self-esteem leads to increased personal self-esteem. If one feels confidence in their community/culture and the people of their community, they naturally will feel a great deal of self-confidence as a member of that group. While this increased self-esteem has numerous positive psychological effects, we offer the unique argument that it also serves to protect against the development of body image concerns. The greater one's self-esteem the less at risk they are for the development of serious body dissatisfaction. An increased sense of self-esteem allows one to feel good about themselves both inside and out.

Our data supports the contention that the African American respondents in our study did not express weight dissatisfaction because they do not internalize the larger culture's conceptions of beauty. This practice of non-internalization, like self-esteem, has arisen out of a strong sense of racial identity. A strong sense of group identification causes one to internalize the group's values, attitudes, and beliefs, while simultaneously rejecting those held by the larger society. With regard to body image, this has been of great importance to Black women. African American women in our sample, by and large, do not accept White notions of weight. Instead, these young women, as espoused by the Black community, internalize a more egalitarian notion of beauty. This becomes yet another means of protecting young African American girls from developing body image concerns.

We argue that a strong sense of racial identity is linked directly to girl's positive self-esteem and non-internalization. These factors in turn serve to protect African American women from developing serious body image concerns because these factors influence them to reject White standards of weight and beauty. For African American girls, mothers become particularly salient in that they are often the root of perpetuating racial identity, self-esteem, and non-internalization. The mothers of the African American girls in our study, taught their daughters to be proud of their culture and their heritage. They taught them to be confident in themselves as women. They taught them to believe in their future and their potential. They taught them to disregard the racist and sexist comments of the larger culture. And perhaps most importantly they taught them to be comfortable with their body size. The Black community has also been instrumental in fostering a strong sense of racial identity in many individuals in our sample.

African Americans live within two social constructions. They are bound by the macrocosm, the larger popular culture, (that of the American-White culture), while still

firmly rooted to their Black sub-culture. This dual identity presents African Americans with a very unique set of tensions. Young Black girls find they need to integrate aspects of both cultures into their lives in an intricate balance. As this study has demonstrated, African American women in our sample operate outside of White norms of beauty, focusing not on weight, but on character and presentation as integral aspects of one's beauty. However, the women in our study did indicate appearance concerns over the issues of hair and skin. Moreover, our respondents asserted that in many ways they subscribed not to alternative interpretations of hair style and skin color but rather to White interpretations. While certainly they accept the idea affirming Afrocentric understandings of hair style and skin color as beautiful, they have not been able to fully reject the White ideals surrounding these conceptions. The deep seeded cultural beliefs in such notions of beauty run far too deep. Conceptions about these attributes have permeated Black culture often prompting African American women, to straighten their hair and try to achieve lighter skin tones in an attempt to be acceptable to both White and Black societies.

Existing research has also shown that there is a relationship between racial identity, self-esteem and body image. Makkar and Strube's (1995) research shows that, based on the extent to which they identify with Black culture, Black women are increasingly aspiring to a beauty ideal consistent with Black culture (1995, p. 1549). Likewise, they link self-esteem to body image. However, in their research racial identity and self-esteem are largely confounded despite efforts to measure each concept. Put differently, it is difficult to tell where and how racial identity and self-esteem are linked or if they are distinct though intermingling. This is an important contribution that our study provides. By utilizing a qualitative design and grounded theory approach to analysis our respondents provided many important insights into the sources of racial identity, racial pride, self-esteem and non-internalization that are meaningful in their lives and to their body images.

While African American women have been able to successfully ignore the weight ideals advocated by the larger culture, this does not mean that they are immune from eating disorders. In fact the opposite is true. Wilson and Russell (1996, p. 101) found that the rate of obesity among Black women was twice that of White women, especially among poor, working class single black mothers. They suggest that some Black women may use binge eating as a way to cope with poverty. Diabetes and hypertension also become prominent medical risks associated with obesity. Job loss is another related risk factor as well (Wilson & Russell, 1996, p. 101; Thompson, 1996).

As more and more African American communities are becoming exposed to White culture and White norms of beauty, eating disorders are going to grow more and more rapidly. A recent report by Becker, Burwell, Gilman, Herzog, and Hamburg (2000) studied the effect that White culture, particularly American television programming, had on the isolated island culture of Fiji. In 1995 when American television was introduced to the island, only 3 percent of girls reported that they practiced bulimic behavior. In 1998, after three years of exposure to American programming, that number had jumped to 15 percent. That same year, 74 percent reported feeling "too big or fat" and 62 percent stated that they had dieted in the last month. Traditionally, weight loss has been perceived in Fijian culture as a sign of illness and deteriorating health, however that cultural

understanding of beauty is quickly subsiding to that of White culture, and the ultra slim ideal.

What has happened in Fiji serves as a warning toll to cultures throughout the world. With an increasing trend towards economic globalization, we must remember that cultural globalization inevitably follows. The experience in Fiji is only one in a long line of potential eating disordered outbreaks in an increasingly White-washed world. Unless significant changes are made within White culture the ultra thin ideal will spiral dangerously throughout the world.

In light of the above findings and discussion, we can clearly surmise that cultural, not individualistic, factors define beauty. We now know that it is the belief in cultural messages of beauty which is transmitting serious issues of appearance dissatisfaction. Prevention and treatment of body image dissatisfaction, and even eating disorders can, in large measure, only be undertaken by challenging dominant social norms of beauty. The results of this paper thus challenge White culture to re-think its obsession with thinness and embrace a more diverse conception of beauty.

It is important to challenge the extreme thinness messages not only from the media, the medical field, and the diet industry, but also the cultural values regarding thinness which we ascribe to and which promote these unrealistic and narrow beauty ideals. It is also vital that we become change agents and are pro-active in overcoming this form of beauty oppression in our everyday lives in order to alter the very society that supports it.

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### Author's Note

Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber is professor of sociology at Boston College. She has published widely on the impact of socio-cultural factors on women's body image and is co-developer of HyperRESEARCH, a qualitative data analysis software package. She is author of *Am I Thin Enough Yet? The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity* (Oxford University Press, 1996), which was selected as one of Choice Magazine's best academic books for 1996. She is co-editor of *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology: An Interdisciplinary Reader* (Oxford University Press, 1999). Dr. Hesse-Biber may be contacted at Boston College, McGuinn 404, 140 Commonwealth Avenue, Chestnut Hill, MA, Massachusetts 02467; Telephone: ; E-mail: Hesse@bc.edu.

Stephanie Howling is a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard University. Her research interests include economic sociology and gender inequality. Ms. Howling could be contacted at Harvard University, Department of Sociology, William James Hall, 33 Kirkland Street, 5<sup>th</sup> floor, Cambridge, MA 02138; E-mail: howling@fas.harvard.edu. At the time of the study, Ms. Howling was an undergraduate student at Boston, College. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Ms. Howling.

Patricia Leavy is assistant professor of sociology at Stonehill College in Easton, MA. She has published in the areas of qualitative research, feminist theory and methods, popular culture, critical theory and gender studies. She is co-editor of *Approaches to Qualitative Research: A Reader on Theory and Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2003). Dr. Leavy may be contacted at Stonehill College, Sociology and Criminology, 320 Washington Street, Easton, MA, 02357; Telephone: 508-565-1000; E-mail: pleavy@stonehill.edu.

Meg Lovejoy is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at Brandeis University, Waltham, MA. She has published in the area of ethnicity, weight and eating disorders. Ms. Lovejoy may be contacted at Brandeis University, Department of Sociology, Mailstop 071, Waltham, MA, 02454.

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