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# The interplay between gender, race and weight status: Self perceptions and social consequences

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## ABSTRACT

This paper uses data from nearly 15,000 young adult respondents to the Add Health survey to examine racial and gender differences in the perceptions and social rewards to weight. The data include information on several typically unmeasured domains: self-perceptions of ideal weight, attractiveness ratings, and measured weight information, along with ties to a series of adult outcomes. Results show important gender and racial differences in ideal weight as well as differences for both self-perceived attractiveness and interviewer rated attractiveness. Findings also suggest the existence of large differences in socio-cultural rewards and sanctions for weight status. Black respondents, particularly women, appear to receive lower “obesity penalties” in both their self-perceived and interviewer accessed attractiveness ratings than other groups. These findings suggest the need to consider new classes of policies directed at shifting relative social benefits and consequences to weight status.

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## 1. Introduction

The persistent and large racial differences in the weight status of individuals have been documented in a number of studies across multiple decades of analyses. There have been several explanations for the magnitude and persistence of the obesity gaps, including biological/genetic differences, socioeconomic differences (e.g. poverty), and socio-cultural differences (ideal body types) among others. While there has been much research showing the importance of the multiple hypothesized determinants of the racial differences in weight, a large amount of variation remains unexplained. Further, much more progress in explaining the persistent racial differences is needed to suggest ways to reduce the rising rates of obesity in subgroups and the population (Walker and Kawachi, 2011).

Coupled with the racial disparities in weight are equally important and interrelated gender differences in obesity rates. Indeed, Burke and Heiland (2008) show that the main racial differences in weight are between black and white women and that the male gaps are nearly non-existent (see also Walker and Kawachi, 2011 for a review). This interplay between race and gender suggests the need for a more nuanced set of hypotheses to explain the empirical facts as well as provide policy relevant information to close the gaps. That is, many biological hypotheses do not easily fit the observed gender/race differences. For example, Walker and Kawachi (2011) outline several potential hypotheses that may explain racial differences in obesity but would likely fail to match the racial differences by gender groups.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, socio-cultural theories and

<sup>1</sup> The authors suggest overeating as a maladaptive coping strategy, occupational segregation by race and sleep patterns, residential disparities, television-based marketing of foods, and cultural norms and practices.

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evidence may help explain the persistence and magnitude of the differences in obesity found in the data.

Indeed, while often hypothesized to be an important component of racial/gender differences in obesity, socio-cultural differences have proven difficult to pinpoint with any specificity using many currently available national datasets. A primary hypothesis is the existence and importance of cultural differences in ideal body types, so that the relative social benefits and consequences associated with obesity could differ substantially by race and gender (e.g. Fitzgibbon et al., 2000; Gipson et al., 2005; Yancey et al., 2006). This is important as the health returns and pecuniary returns to obesity have been shown to be severely negative (Cawley, 2004), though they also are different by gender and race. Unfortunately, while most national datasets are able to document the health and wage penalties from obesity, few contain the necessary information to examine important components of the potential differential social punishments across groups. In particular, there is ample suggestive evidence that the social desirability of black women increases with body weight across a portion of the weight distribution (see Burke and Heiland, 2008 for a review and references) but further, more conclusive evidence is required. More generally, additional evidence could be useful for increasing understanding of these different preferences and constraints and may allow richer models of health behavior choices by economists and other social scientists to be pursued. And new approaches and evidence will allow policymakers to formulate new policies that take into account how different groups and individuals think about weight status.

This paper presents new findings of important and large racial and gender differences in the relative social benefits and consequences of obesity. These differences occur internally and externally: blacks report higher ideal body weights than whites; additionally, *independent interviewers* also provide higher attractiveness ratings to blacks who are overweight or obese than whites, particularly if the interviewer is also black. The findings also suggest smaller penalties related to obesity when the individual is in an environment characterized by high levels of obesity or a high percentage of blacks. And these results are concentrated in women. The results also show smaller penalties of being obese in several adult outcomes, including years of schooling, marital status, and wages, for blacks but not whites. Overall, these findings suggest an important and not often recognized area of resistance to most pushes to reduce weight through taxing unhealthy foods and encouraging exercise, etc.—that these interventions may reduce some individual's social desirability. Thus, it may be necessary to consider new classes of interventions that target the formation of the relative social benefits and consequences for being overweight or obese.

## 2. Background literature

There is a large literature documenting the many forces in developed countries that could have contributed to the ongoing “obesity epidemic”, such as long term

technological changes affecting food prices and the increase in sedentary occupations and eating outside of the home (Lakdawalla and Philipson, 2002, 2009; Cutler et al., 2003). Rather than explaining the trajectories of weight over time, a complementary literature has also documented the cross sectional differences across groups in the prevalence of overweight and obesity. This literature has shown consistent evidence of important subgroups with high rates of obesity, including the poor, minorities, and individuals living in southern states (e.g. McLaren, 2011).<sup>2</sup> However, it is also true that racial and gender differences are not adequately explained by easily measured socioeconomic characteristics, such as education, income, occupation, and marital status (Burke and Heiland, 2008). The authors also report that behavior differences in smoking, exercise, and food consumption only account for a small amount of the variation in BMI differences. Thus, Burke and Heiland go on to suggest three explanations for the persistence racial and gender gaps in obesity: socioeconomic incentive (e.g. wages), health-related incentives and socio-cultural incentives.<sup>3</sup>

Of these explanations, there is a large literature showing the degree of socioeconomic rewards and punishment based on weight, and these effects vary by race and gender. For example, among women, higher BMI has been tied to lower wages (Baum and Ford, 2004). Cawley (2004) shows this effect is only evident for white women in the US. Rooth (2009) shows evidence from an audit study that obese job applications receive fewer callbacks for both men and women in Sweden—in additional analysis the results are shown to suggest that men receive fewer callbacks due to lower perceived attractiveness while women receive fewer callbacks due to obesity status.<sup>4</sup> Also among women, higher BMI reduces the likelihood of marriage as well as lowers the quality of spouses, though again, the effect is concentrated in white women in the US (Averett and Korenman, 1996, 1999).

While Burke and Heiland (2008) provide strong evidence of different health-related incentives by race (higher incentives to be thin for whites), they primarily suggest the need for researchers to focus on the socio-cultural explanations for the gender and racial obesity differences. The authors also provide direct evidence replicating and extending a large literature that they review on differences in ideal body types by race and gender groups. In particular, black women have been found to consistently report their ideal body weight is

<sup>2</sup> However, see the important paper by Burkhauser and Cawley (2008), who show there are large differences in measured fatness depending on the use of BMI versus percent body fat. In fact, the authors show that the black–white gap in obesity for men increases using this measure while the black–white gap for women is reduced by 50%. Unfortunately, the data used in the current study does not include both measures of BMI and percent body fat, suggesting a cautious interpretation is required when viewing the results due to potential measurement error in the obesity measure.

<sup>3</sup> See Burke and Heiland (2008) for an excellent survey of the literature examining biological and behavioral differences across groups that may explain obesity disparities.

<sup>4</sup> See Puhl (2011) for a review of evidence for bias and discrimination against obesity individuals.

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