



Ethnic differences in the stigma of obesity: Identification and engagement with a thin ideal

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ABSTRACT

In the current research, components of disidentification theory [Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype vulnerability and the intellectual test performance of African-Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69, 797–811] are extended to the domain of body weight and provide an explanation as to why Black women typically do not – but under certain circumstances do – stigmatize obesity. Across three studies, results show that Black women are generally less likely to stigmatize obesity than are White women [see also Hebl, M., & Heatherton, T. F. (1997). The stigma of obesity: The differences are black and white. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 24, 417–426]. Taken as a whole, the current research also provides preliminary evidence consistent with disidentification theory to demonstrate that there are situations in which Black women will re-engage with valuing thinness, particularly when re-engagement is tied to conceptions about the self.

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Women in the US are pressured to be thin – they are constantly surrounded by media images of gaunt models, increasingly skinnier actresses, and other thin weight ideals (e.g., Katzmarzyk & Davis, 2001; Milke, 1999; Owen & Laurel-Seller, 2000). However, Black women may be more immune to such pressures than are White women, as evidence shows that Black women are less likely to stigmatize obesity and experience eating disorders than are White women (Dolan, Lacey, & Evans, 1990; Hebl & Heatherton, 1997; Mulholland & Mintz, 2001). One explanation for such differences involves *disidentification theory* (Quinn & Crocker, 1999; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995), which suggests that when stigmatized individuals experience threat in a domain, they begin to disengage from and ultimately disidentify from valuing the domain. Two parallel streams of research support the notion that Black women might disengage and eventually disidentify with thinness as an ideal. The first demonstrates that as young children, both Black and White girls initially stigmatize obesity (Margulies, Floyd, & Hojnosi, 2007; Richardson, Goodman, Hastorf, & Dornbusch, 1961), while the second suggests that older Black female adults, who are presented with fewer thin media and role models (and thus, may experience a sense of threat in the domain of thinness) do not stigmatize obesity to the same extent as do White female adults (Hebl & Heatherton, 1997). We propose that Black

women, who are less likely to be thin than White women, might re-engage in devaluing obesity, particularly when their social identity can be positively linked to doing so. This theory is explored across three studies, and we consider the chronic body-related experiences and coping strategies of Black and White women as well as the implications of removing threat perceptions on the attitudes of Black women.

Disidentification theory

The process of disidentification, proposed by Steele (1997; see also Steele & Aronson 1995), describes Black Americans' rejection of the standards and ideals of the White community in an attempt to protect or affirm their sense of self-esteem. By disidentifying, Black individuals do not base their self-evaluations on the domain in which they are stereotyped (i.e., academics); rather, they view the domain as unimportant and irrelevant to their self-worth and evaluative system. Research on disidentification has been extended to many other domains (e.g., women's math performances: Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999; perceptions that elderly individuals hold: Levy, 1999; and Black and White athletes sports' performances: Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999) but has not yet been applied to the body size domain.

More recently, researchers have identified an early stage of disidentification, which has been termed "disengagement" (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998; Schmader, Major, & Gramzow, 2001). Disengagement is

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likely to occur when individuals distance themselves from a threatening domain or suggest that performance in threatening domain is unimportant. However, disengagement tends to be more short-term than disidentification and can be context-specific, thereby allowing individuals to benefit when they achieve in a threatening domain but maintain positive self-views when they do not. Steele, Spencer, and Aronson (2002) propose that disengagement may lead to disidentification, particularly if individuals experience long-term threat in a domain and cope with it by permanently detaching their identity from the domain. Black women may be motivated to disengage and eventually disidentify from weight standards, particularly if they are threatened by potentially being larger, on average, than White women. Indeed, this is the case (for comparisons, see Health, 2006). Thus, Black women face greater levels of failure in meeting societal aspirations for thinness and may protect themselves from the stigmatizing effects of being overweight by similarly rejecting the views of others as a relevant basis for self-esteem (see also Kerr, Crocker, & Broadnax, 1995).

Black women might disengage from White cultural ideology concerning body size ideals if it psychologically benefits them to do so (see Ogbu, 1995). The current research examines this phenomenon and proposes that under certain conditions (e.g., when threat is removed and the ingroup clearly succeeds in a given domain), Black women may re-engage (at least temporarily) with the domain ideal. To test this possibility, we conduct three studies, the first of which examines typical perceptions of Black and White women and represents an improvement and replication of research by Hebl and Heatherton (1997). The second study experimentally manipulates threat removal in the domain of thinness, allowing a direct test of re-engagement with a thin ideal. Finally, the third study manipulates threat removal and examines the self-protective processes that disengaging may have for Black women.

Study 1

Method

Participants

Sixty-six (21 Black and 45 White) female college students at Northeastern University volunteered to participate in this study.

Development of the stimulus materials

Using a procedure consistent with Hebl and Heatherton (1997), a set of pictures were collected of Black and White women and were grouped into three categories (“thin,” “average,” and overweight”) by seven raters. Only photos with 100% agreement in the categorizations were selected for use in the experiment. To standardize the photographs across race, Adobe Photoshop® allowed us to attach Black and White heads (matched in level of facial attractiveness) to the same body, and adjust body skin tones or arms and necks to match respective faces. Two complete sets of stimuli were developed to ensure that idiosyncrasies due to any single photograph did not produce the results. Each set had two different White and two different Black faces attached to a small, medium, and large body. Thus, there were 12 unique pictures in each of the two sets of stimuli. Participants viewed six target photographs (embedded within other filler photographs) that included three photographs of Black women (thin, medium, and large) and three photographs of White women (thin, medium, and large); thus, it was a fully crossed, within-subjects design.

Questionnaire

First, using 9-point Likert-type scales with anchors of 1 (“Not at all X”) and 9 (“Very X”), participants responded to six items

adapted from Gledhill (1990): (a) “How attractive is this person?” (b) “How intelligent is this person?” (c) “How good is this person at her job?” (d) “How successful is this person in relationships?” (e) “In general, how happy is this person with her life?” and (f) “How popular is this person?”. A Positivity Composite was created by taking the average of these six items (Cronbach alpha = .93). As a manipulation check, participants also rated how heavy they perceived each of the 12 individuals to be.

Second, using 9-point Likert-type scales with anchors of 1 (“I disagree very strongly”) and 9 (“I agree very strongly”), participants also completed four items developed specifically for the current study to assess identification with a thin ideology: (a) “The ideal woman in our society is thin,” (b) “I value thinness,” (c) “In general, I believe that the thinner women are, the more attractive they are,” and (d) “I am strongly influenced by society’s emphasis on thinness.” Using these same scales, they also completed two items from Crandall’s Anti-fat Attitudes (AFA) fear of fat subscale (1994): “I fear becoming obese” and “One of the worst things that could happen to me is for me to gain 25 pounds.” A factor analysis revealed two distinct factors, the first including the four Identification items (Eigenvalue = 3.06, 51% of Variance Accounted for; Cronbach’s alpha = .79), and the second including the two AFA items (Eigenvalue = 1.19; 19.88% of the Variance Accounted for; Cronbach’s alpha = .76).

Procedure

Twelve (three male and nine female; three Black and nine White) students served as experimenters and recruited students on campus to participate. Participants viewed and rated 12 stimulus targets presented in random order, completed ratings after viewing each picture, and then completed the Identification and AFA items.

Results²

Manipulation check

A significant main effect conducted on the mixed model [2 (Participant Race: Black, White) × 2 (Target Race: Black, White) × 3 (Target Size: Thin, Medium, Heavy) ANOVA emerged $F(2, 77) = 276.33$, $p < .001$, revealing that participants were able to successfully distinguish between the three target weights. As expected, participants rated large-sized targets ($M = 6.84$, $SD = 0.67$) to be heavier than both medium-sized targets ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 0.72$), $t(65) = 8.07$, $p < .001$, and thin targets ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.88$), $t(65) = 25.32$, $p < .001$; and average-sized targets were rated heavier than were thin targets, $t(65) = 19.72$, $p < .001$.³ Participant race did not show main effects and/or significantly interact with size ratings (all p ’s $> .75$), which is important to establish since we do not expect differing perceptions of body size to drive the results.

² In describing the overall effects of each of the three studies, we present both same- and cross-race ratings but our research question involves comparisons of Black and White participants’ same-race ratings, so we focus on them particularly across the three studies. The reason for this focus is that past research has shown (and the current studies also show) that Black targets are often rated more favorably than are White targets by both Black and White participants (see Hebl & Heatherton, 1997). This pattern may represent ingroup favoritism toward Black participants, political correctness on the part of White participants, and/or other sources of bias (see Judd, Park, Ryan, Brauer, & Kraus, 1995). Although we find this pattern to be interesting (and consistent), it is beyond the scope of interest in the current study.

³ Medium-sized targets were rated slightly heavier than the intended scale midpoint (5) and that the heavy individuals were rated to be somewhat lower than anticipated (9).

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