Understanding the Formation and Perception of Body Image Across Women of Different Races

A Thesis Presented to the Department of Sociology
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors

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April 13, 2015

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Acknowledgements

First off, I want to thank all of the incredible professors I have had in the past four years at the University of Michigan who have encouraged me to think outside of my comfort zone. I especially want to thank David Schoem for teaching Sociology of Education in 2012, for without that class I might never have become a sociology major. Lacey Bobier was an incredibly down to earth and invaluable resource throughout the research and writing process. I would also like to thank Renee Anspach for being a very helpful guide in the qualitative research process and giving me lots of feedback and encouragement about my study when I was not so sure of it myself. Last, but definitely not least, I would like to thank Sarah Burgard for being an inspiration both academically and personally and for making a thesis seem like something that I could actually do. I could never have survived the past year and a half without the help and expertise of you all.

I would also like to thank my tiny little cohort for sticking through this process with me. When I applied to write a thesis two years ago, I was not quite sure how hard it would be, but I am so incredibly proud of the work that we have accomplished. I would especially like to thank Nina Lucido for being my rock and my go to girl. Without her, late nights at the grad library would have been much less exciting. I am so happy that I was able to make such an amazing friend for this thesis process and for life.

My two biggest supporters, coffee and chocolate, deserve lots of credit for seeing this project through to the end. Without you guys, well I'd be one less caffeinated and less productive person.

It goes without saying that this project would not have been made possible without the help of the sixteen amazing women who I had the opportunity to interview. I am eternally grateful for their openness, honesty, and strength in telling their stories and allowing me to listen. I truly enjoyed talking to each and every one of them, which made writing this paper a joy for me.

Finally, I want to applaud my friends and family for putting up with me the past year and a half as I attempted to write this paper and figure out the rest of my life after graduation. Thank you to Ariel, Emily, and Sundai for being the most compassionate, smart, and loving women I know and for making me want to be nothing less than that myself. My parents and sister have been especially supportive throughout this process and throughout the last four years of my life as I bounced from major to major trying to find my place. Thank you for always encouraging me to follow my own path and for believing in me even when I didn't know where that was.

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Abstract

The majority of research on body image thus far has been conducted in the field of social psychology, which focuses on the individual and personal beliefs that help people to form and understand their body image. However, given the sharp increase in obesity prevalence in the U.S., substantial differences in the risk of obesity by race/ethnicity, and demographic research that shows structural determinants of obesity risk, it is necessary to look at body image through a more sociological lens. This study looks at how college-aged women form and understand their body image. I conducted 16 interviews with black and white women at an elite research university in the Midwestern United States. I predicted that there would be differences by race in body image formation that could have influences on behavior important for body size. The results from this study suggest, however, that these college women understand and formed their body image in very similar ways, regardless of race, and reinforced that social environment and structures are very influential to women's body image formation. This finding has implications for how we address the topic of body image with girls, focusing more on the larger, societal forces that have effects on body image.

I. Introduction

In this day and age, the phrase 'body image' has become a somewhat loaded, overused buzzword. People often say it without having a clear idea of what the word truly means. Because a term like 'body image' has become so commonplace in today's society and is integral to understanding how individuals come to know their bodies, it is important to operationalize and have a better grasp of this phrase.

Body image is a presumably personal thing that might appear to be a product of individual belief rather than social influence. However, because of evidence of its formation in peer and social groups (Lieberman et al. 2001) during adolescence (Rosen and Gross 1987), it would appear to be something that is socially-defined and culturally understood. This is similar to Durkheim's idea of the social fact, the concept that there are certain values and norms in society that transcend individual thoughts and beliefs and are capable of acting as social constraints on the individual (Durkheim 1982). This suggests that body image can be defined not just on a personal level, but may vary in systematic ways across wider demographic identity groups, like those defined by gender, race or SES (Lovejoy 2001). It is important to understand how body image might vary by these social identities, as it might offer an explanation for some of the stratification by gender and race that exists for some health conditions, such as diabetes, that are linked to body size and composition.

Consider for example, obesity in the US. Several studies have found that people of color, especially non-Hispanic black people, are at an increased risk for obesity (Collins and Williams 1995). An additional disparity by gender places black women at the greatest disadvantage in the weight gain crisis (Ailshire and House

2011, Borders et al. 2006). When comparing gender differences in obesity

prevalence by race, it is clear that race differences in obesity prevalence are greater

among women than men, meaning there is more variation in body size by race for

women than men (see figure 1, Beydoun and Wang 2007). This leads researchers to

question why these inequalities exist, and to explore the possible factors creating

different health outcomes for people of different genders and races.
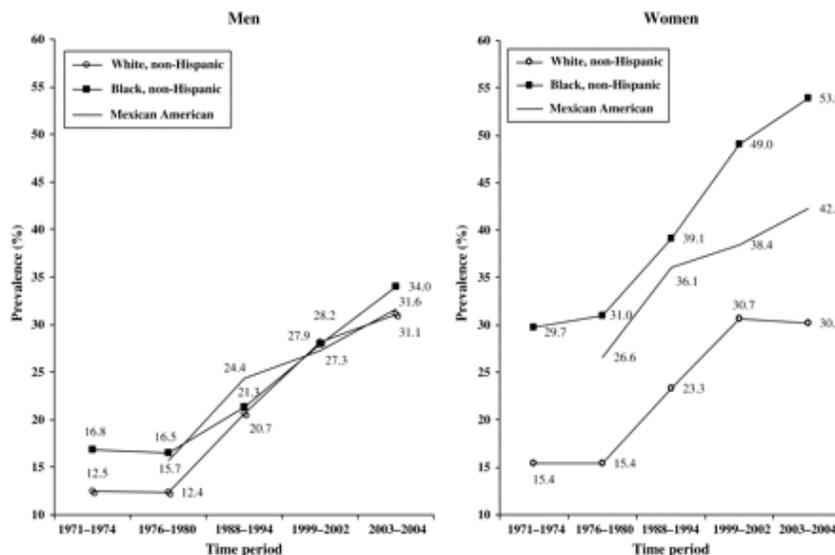
Figure 1. Trends in the prevalence of obesity in US adults, by gender and ethnicity, National Health Nutrition Examination Survey, 1971-2004. Beydoun and Wang 2007.

Sociologists have noted that the social and physical environment contributes

to the risk of obesity. Factors in these environments that have been identified

include access to healthy food, neighborhood safety, and stress (Lee 2011). While

much attention has been focused on these social and environmental factors,

researchers have also argued that culturally- and socially-defined body image ideals

that drive eating and exercising habits may be important determinants of body size

and are specific to and differ between gender and race groups (Lovejoy 2001). Body

image ideals and behaviors linked to norms about body size and composition could

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influence women's body weight and potentially perpetuate disparities in the prevalence of obesity.

The aim of this study is to explore how and what college-aged women of different races understand as their body image. Much of the research on body image is in social psychology, focusing on the individual's beliefs and practices. Most research on obesity is in demography and sociology, and examines the influence of larger structures. This study aims to bridge the two areas, by asking if body image is socially and culturally constructed. If body image is indeed culturally constructed (Lovejoy 2001), it would be a possible contributing factor to the extreme disparities in obesity prevalence for women by race. Using a qualitative approach to operationalize the term body image, this study hopes to look more into the question of *why* obesity stratification exists in the US, as opposed to *what* obesity stratification patterns look like since differences in prevalence have already been clearly documented (Beydoun and Wang 2007, Collins and Williams 1995, Ailshire and House 2011).

I will ask the following research questions: How do women operationalize the term body image? What sorts of people, situations, or life events help a woman to form her body image? Do body image perception and formation vary by race? Might this variation have effects on behavior and lead to disparities in obesity prevalence by race for women?

II. Literature Review

a. Body image as social fact

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Psychology has looked at body image as an individually-determined construct. However, Lovejoy (2001) suggests that it really differs across wider identity groups, like those defined by an individual's gender, race or SES. Therefore, it is necessary to see body image as a socially-defined phenomenon. The famous French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, coined the term 'social fact,' which means, "any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual in an external constraint" (Durkheim 1982). Understanding body image as a social fact suggests that it is not based on individual beliefs, but larger norms and values in a society. These widely held ideas about body image are capable of exerting a social constraint over individuals. By this definition, we would expect individuals from similar identity backgrounds to have shared ideas about body image formation and influence and to respond to body image pressures in similar ways.

b. Body image formation

Charles Horton Cooley, one of the founding members of the American Sociological Association, is best known for his concept of the Looking Glass Self (LGS). This term means that a person's self is grown out of society's interpersonal interactions, which is to say that individuals are defined by the relations they have with others, and the perceptions of how these others, the people who make up this person's society, view the individual (metaperceptions). In other words, the self is a social construction and identity depends on how a person views themselves in the eyes of others in society. Cooley believed that this process of self-construction starts at a very young age, but is ongoing, and that the self evolves based on changing social environments and the people a given person interacts with.

Cooley outlined the LGS concept to have three basic elements: "the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification" about the judgment of the other (Cooley 1902). These three parts contribute to the self-image one has of themselves and ultimately contributes to that individual's sense of self-worth.

Mead, a founder of the sociological perspective of symbolic interactionism, further contributed to this idea of a social self. Central to a social self was the ability to take on the role of the other, or place oneself in the position of others. According to Mead, the self develops in two phases. The first is in the "play" stage, when the individual learns to take on the perspective of the significant others in his or her immediate environment. The second phase is the "game" stage, when the individual acquires a sense of the collective perspective from a larger social environment; this is known as the generalized other. The generalized other concept suggests that when an individual prepares to act, they visualize how a collective group of members would view or judge them. Mead's theory implies that body image is learned from others in the immediate environment and the larger social environment (Ritzer 2008).

This idea echoes that of Cooley, who believed that the self could not be self-reliant and draws on not only the opinions of others, but also on a given individual's own *perception* of the opinions of others. Mead also believed that both the construction of the actor and the world around them were incredibly dynamic processes and not static positions. For this reason, self concept is ever-changing and

dependent on particular reference points that an individual has at particular times of their life.

All of the tenets of symbolic interactionism and the looking glass self assume that the individual is able to interpret and read the social world around them. If individuals do not have the acuity to identify others' perceptions of them, the idea of the looking glass self is almost irrelevant. Cook and Douglas (1998) performed a study that asked college students to rate two different family relationships (with their mother and father) based on how they thought they acted with the other person, how that person acted toward them and how they thought they were viewed by the other person. They found that college students, while not always accurate at perceiving their parents' perceptions of their behavior and ability to cooperate, tended to let these perceptions affect how they thought of themselves. Their own perceptions of what their parents thought could thus be said to affect their self-construction, which shows how influential perceptions were in structuring individual beliefs and behaviors.

Harter, Robinson and Stocker (1996) found a connection between peer approval, determined by how respondents believed others saw them, and self-worth. Their study found that there was a high correlation between perceived peer approval and self-worth. Participants in the study who determined their self-worth based on peer approval were more likely to be distracted from schoolwork by peers in school and to report a lower peer approval and self-worth than those who said self-worth preceded peer approval or saw no connection between self-worth and peer approval. This study shows how important the LGS is in helping individuals to

define and measure their own self-worth and self-confidence. It also shows how ideas of the self can have effects on behavior.

c. Peer/social environment influence on body image

Adolescence appears to be a very important time for the development of body dissatisfaction and dieting behaviors (Rosen and Gross 1987). Young women prove to be particularly sensitive to prevalent cultural customs regarding physical appearance. It is likely that most women will begin to form their opinion of their bodies around this time, and there is ample research to point to the influence of peer groups on body image formation. Additionally, adolescence is the time when a young women's body develops. These body transformations have effects on how a woman sees and understands her body (Tiggemann 2004).

To test whether peer pressure was a strong predictor of eating behavior and body esteem, Lieberman et al. (2001), conducted a study on 876 girls regarding body esteem, eating behavior, peer pressure and interpersonal relationships. Their results showed that girls who viewed themselves from the point of view of their peers and girls who were viewed by their peers as being popular had lower body esteem and engaged in more disordered eating behavior. Controlling for all social and relational factors, Lieberman et al. (2001) found that peer pressure contributed to disordered eating above and beyond the other variables, like body-related teasing, interpersonal relationship influences, and biomaturational influences. Their study showed that for dieting, peer modeling was an important indicator of dieting behavior, more than social reinforcement. For example, it had more influence on a girls' behavior if her friends were on a diet than if they believed that it was

important to their friends to be thin. This indicates that the peer social group is incredibly influential in shaping the opinions of adolescent girls towards their bodies and toward dieting.

Hutchinson and Rapee (2007) conducted a study that reinforces Lieberman's findings that friend networks are extremely influential to young women's' body image. They found that perceived friendship influence on body image attitudes and eating behaviors contributed notably to the prediction of individual girls' body image concern, dieting, and use of extreme weight loss behaviors (EWLBs). They also showed that during early adolescence, friendship group members shared similarities in dietary restraint, EWLBs and binge eating. Together, these two sets of results suggest the importance of social factors, like friend groups, in the development of body image dissatisfaction in adolescence and early adulthood.

d. Life course stage and body image

Women's bodies are subject to many changes throughout their lives, which begs the question, how does body image vary as a woman ages? Tiggemann (2004) did a review of literature to see if body image across the lifespan is stable or changing. She found that women's dissatisfaction with their bodies appears to be quite stable across the lifespan. This is believed to be because as women age, they find age-appropriate peers to make comparisons with. Additionally, they may have more realistic expectations for what is possible for their bodies at an older age, which might put body image on the periphery of women's minds as they age.

In the same study, Tiggemann (2004) showed that puberty and pregnancy are two milestones that have the potential to alter the fat composition, and the

overall look, of a women's body. Therefore, looking at a time frame between these two life events, as most women in college fit this description, might enable understanding of body image without the influence of confounding factors like pregnancy effects or pubescent body changes.

e. Body image and social identity

When looking at the issue of body image through a gender lens, Malson and Monaghan (2013) argue that men are much more easily able to justify obesity with their gender identity, which means they face less stigmatization for being obese, while women are seen as more susceptible to body pressures because of their body size. In this sense, men do not experience the same shame and social pressures concerning their weight as women. The two researchers conducted in-depth interviews that asked men, particularly overweight men, questions about male embodiment and weight-related issues. Their data showed that men used the word 'big' when referring to sizeable male bodies; the word didn't carry the negative stigma that it might for women. For men, it seems that 'bigness' can even be a desirable masculine trait. Some men in the study even mentioned how they used their size to take up more physical space and validate their gender within heterosexual spaces. All of the men made a point of saying they could ignore weight and body talk. They discussed how comments made by their friends about their weight just "washed over them." This is seen as another way for men to reinforce gender roles, by appearing tough, whereas women who care about these issues are considered to be sensitive (Malson and Monaghan 2013).

When discussing women and body image in their interviews, most men talked about feeling sad for women who thought they needed to lose weight because of media or social pressure. They spoke condescendingly about women being the "victims" of the media, who were mentally weak, irrational and disconnected from reality. Yet again, it seems this is a way for men to uphold masculine ideals (Malson and Monaghan 2013).

Taking a look at women specifically, it is clear that body image is influenced by many internal and external contexts and is ever changing, as women encounter or create new experiences and re-interpret old ones. In Paquette and Raine's article (2004), they demonstrated that the most prominent external factors influencing women's body image were the media and relationships (with partners, other women and health professionals). Women's personal self-concept could be interpreted in two ways, as self-critical, holding physical standards that they did not and could not achieve, or self-confident, being aware and reflective of external conditions that might influence their sense of self (Paquette and Raine 2004).

Finally, it is important to look at body image through the lens of both race and gender together. A study done by Boyd et al. (2011) looked at adolescent girls to see how their identities, primarily race and SES, played a role in assessing their weight and determining if they should take action to control their body size. They found that similar to reported weight, overweight perception is linked to race/ethnicity. African American girls had the highest reported weights, yet perceived themselves as overweight less often than did Hispanic girls. African

American girls also reported a lesser number of weight controlling practices, like dieting or exercise, than both white and Asian girls (Boyd et al. 2011).

Some explanations that have been proposed for African American girls' distinctive behavior include the fact that they see their futures less tied to their relationship with a man and that they have more experience in being the sole providers for their families, as black male unemployment rates are relatively high. In 2012, black children (55 percent) were more likely to live with one parent than non-Hispanic white children (21 percent) (Census Bureau 2012). This would suggest that white women are less practiced at intertwining motherhood and work because they are more likely to raise children in two parent homes, while black women have been combining the two roles for a very long time. In this sense, black women have more positive feelings about working and supporting their families, while white women may look to men more often to support them. This implies that white women are more likely than black women to seek men's approval by making their bodies physically attractive to men and therefore may feel more pressure to fit their body into a particular mold.

Bordo (1993) argues that cultural norms associated with weight and dieting are strategies used to continue to entrap women in practices that recreate their own gendered oppression. This affects white women, while black women face both this gendered oppression as well as racial oppression. Experiencing this combination of oppressions, including sexism, racism, poverty, and sexual abuse, puts black women in a unique position where they might find themselves turning to food for comfort.

Food often provides women of color with the only comfort or security in a world where they are constantly made to feel inferior (Lovejoy 2001).

In addition to continuous and powerful oppression, which could account for their higher weight, black women may have a more positive sense of body and self that doesn't place the same kinds of restrictions and limits on them as it does on white women. There exists a cultural message of strength and self-reliance for African American women among their own community members that white women do not often receive from their community or the media (Boyd et al. 2011, Lovejoy 2001). It seems that African American women derive more power and authority from their gender role than do white women, which gives them more autonomy over their lives and their bodies and leads to more positive feelings about their shape and health (Lovejoy 2001).

f. Obesity

From the 1990s to the early 2000s, obesity rates have increased at such an alarming speed that the condition soon became the nation's most urgent public health concern (Ogden et al. 2012). Reports from 2011-2012 show that obesity rates for youth and adults have not changed significantly from 2003-2004. However, the prevalence is still very high and should still be of great concern to the people and government of the United States (Ogden et al 2014). In 2003-2004 approximately two thirds of adult men and women were obese *or* overweight (Beydoun and Wang 2007). In 2009-2010, obesity rates alone (not including those who were overweight) were 35.7% for adults overall in the US (Ogden et al. 2012). It is

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important to note, however, that while obesity is something that should concern all Americans, it has particularly significant effects on members of minority groups.

Non-Hispanic blacks had the highest prevalence of obesity when looking at data from 2003-2004. The prevalence of obesity among non-Hispanic black women was 20 percentage points higher than that of white women (Beydoun and Wang 2007). These extreme disparities in weight show how stratified the issue of obesity is by race and might lead us to question why we are seeing the unique patterns in obesity prevalence by race and gender. Additionally, the racial/ethnic differences among men were much smaller than among women (Beydoun and Wang 2007). This demonstrates why it is more important to look at women, because that is where the variation lies.

Using evidence from the literature, this study will attempt to look at how body image is socially defined and formed by women. It will take a closer look at where women get ideas about body image and ask whether this varies by race. Finally, it will use body image as a way to question why obesity stratification by race might exist for women.

III. Sociological Significance

Because the term body image is so hard to explain, one of the primary goals of this study is to operationalize it as college-aged women define it. While social psychologists have done a good job of looking at what and who shapes a women's body image, this study, will use theory and methods from sociology, to reexamine how women construct and shape their body image. This study reveals how body image is formed and influenced during and leading up to college and increases

understanding of how body image is much more culturally and socially shaped than previously believed. This study works to illuminate how college-aged women of varying races define and acknowledge the role of body image in their lives and ultimately in their behaviors.

Additionally, I want to ensure that my research includes a group of women from varying body sizes. A lot of the studies that I reviewed focused solely on obese groups, which can be very valuable in its own right. However, without variation in body size, it's difficult to determine which factors could be attributed to variation in body image that could possibly lead to variations in body size.

This study provides needed and novel contributions to sociology, because I conducted a qualitative study to explore one possible reason *why* there are such shocking disparities between women of different races in obesity prevalence. Using an interview-based approach, I hope to gain a better understanding of the interaction between race and gender as they impact weight.

Through all of this research, I hope to be able to answer some questions about how women come to understand their body image, what their feelings toward their body are and whether body image is racially influenced for women. Through all of these, I hope to be able to better understand the larger question: How does body image differ by race in ways that might explain the unique and complex patterns of racialized and gendered weight gain in the US?

IV. Hypothesis

While this study is exploratory, I believe that primarily peer and social networks will influence body image formation in adolescence. I also believe that

body image will vary by race, and any such differences could play an important role in understanding the disparities between women of different races in obesity prevalence, because I believe that body image will shape health behaviors.

V. Methodology

a. Choice of Method

In order to best answer my research questions, I chose to use qualitative interviews. Because there is not a great deal of published work directly addressing my research questions, my research is exploratory, and is best suited by asking open-ended questions.

While a handful of quantitative studies have examined the stratified account of obesity for women of different races, there has been relatively little assessment of whether these inequalities might be caused by differing and race-specific perceptions of ideal body image. Most importantly, I believe that interviews will give me some ability to say how body image plays a part in dictating health behaviors and ultimately might explain why we continue to see the disparities by race in obesity, for women in particular. A survey would fail to get at the particular stories and anecdotes that women have of their most formative body image memories and would not allow women to share their personal experiences with weight that help to shape their individual and unique relationship to their bodies. In other words, I am using interviews in order to help make sense of the underlying ways by which race and body image are linked to eventual body size.

b. Standpoint

I believe it is important to say, right from the beginning, how my own identities have played a role in shaping the way I understand, feel and ultimately am able to work with this topic. As a petite white woman who has struggled with lots of her own body image issues over the years, I have a unique perspective that has allowed me to interact with my participants in very distinctive ways. From choosing this specific topic, to recruiting participants, to interviewing and analyzing, my identities have played a key role in my work as a researcher.

When interviewing white women, I think that having similar identities to them made them very comfortable and likely to open up to me in ways that women who didn't share my identities perhaps were unable to. That being said, I think establishing from the very beginning that I was a college student, like all of my respondents, helped them to feel comfortable talking to me and called attention to our shared experience. Throughout the interview, I did my best to keep the participants relaxed and make the interview a pleasant, low-stress situation for them.

I tried to be acutely aware of how power dynamics, perhaps unintentionally created during interviews could affect the outcomes of my study. I know that being white and thin are both privileged identities and wanted to be mindful of how those affected my respondents' answers and comfort level during the interviews. I also hoped to relay the message to participants that there was no "right answer" and that every question was open to interpretation, which is what I was hoping to gain from each of them.

c. Sample

I originally aimed to conduct interviews with 20 college-aged women at a large Midwestern research institution, but due to recruiting issues that I will touch on later, this target sample size changed several times throughout my data collection process. I chose to look at college-aged women because of my physical and emotional proximity to this population, being a college student myself. I also believed that most of the people in my study would be of childbearing age, without yet having had children themselves, which would place them in between what are considered to be two influential life events affecting body image: puberty and pregnancy (Tiggemann 2004). I also felt that college represented a unique time period in women's lives where body image is incredibly salient, meaning that it is likely something most women think about often and could speak about with authority and knowledge.

I initially hoped to reach undergraduate women from four different race groups: non-Hispanic black, non-Hispanic white, Hispanic, and Arab American. I had planned to interview women who were immigrants themselves, or whose parents, grandparents, or early generations of family had immigrated to the U.S., but this did not present itself as a problem that I ever needed to address. Due to time constraints, however, I was advised to cut down my groups to non-Hispanic black, non-Hispanic white and Arab American. I hoped to get eight participants in each category. Eligibility for the study required that the participants be women, undergraduate students at the target Midwestern research university and either non-Hispanic black (hereafter, "black"), non-Hispanic white (hereafter, "white") or Arab American.

d. Recruiting

After receiving IRB approval, I began recruitment for my interviews by placing flyers (see appendix) around the campus of the large research university where I conducted my study. All of the flyers explained that I was a sociology student at said university, briefly described the topic to be covered in the interview, compensation offered, and my contact information. I placed these flyers in all of the major academic buildings on campus, including libraries and classroom buildings, hoping to reach a wide audience. I received emails from several people, which I followed up with a pre-screen survey (see appendix) to make sure of their eligibility for the study. The survey asked whether they were a student, their sex, race, age, and perceived body size (underweight, normal and overweight). From there, I either asked them to name times when we could conduct the interview or told them they were ineligible for the study. Reasons that people were ineligible included being male, not a student at the university or not belonging to one of the race groups from which I was recruiting.

After about one month, I had scheduled and completed all eight of my interviews with white women. At this point, I had only interviewed one black and no Arab women. I knew that I would need to begin more intentional recruiting, in order to reach the populations I had hoped for. I began emailing student organizations that I believed would specifically have members from the demographic groups I was trying to recruit. This included organizations like the Black Student Union, Black Volunteer Network, Arab Student Association and Arab Organization. I also sent my flyer to many academic departments, including Sociology, Anthropology, Women's

Studies, African American Studies, and American Culture. Finally, I made pleas for research participants in a handful of undergraduate sociology classes that I thought would have more diverse populations, including Sociology of Race and Ethnicity.

After not having any success in recruiting women of color, I decided that I would not recruit Arab women any longer, because I had not yet heard from any respondents. I also felt that I could say something just as important about two better-known groups, black and white women, as with a less studied population. With this in mind, I made an amendment to my IRB application, increasing my incentive money from five to ten dollars in cash, hoping this would further motivate women to participate.

After contacting a former classmate who led a student organization specifically targeted to black women, I was able to speak at a meeting about my research and make a more straightforward and direct request for participants. This ended up being incredibly valuable, and having a contact within the organization gave me rapport with the members that I might not have had otherwise. This helped me to reach seven more black female respondents. I worried however, that since most of my participants came from one specific social group they might therefore represent a very particular, possibly skewed view of the population I was trying to reach. To hopefully disprove that there was anything different about the group I interviewed, I sent a follow up email to all my previous interviewees to ask about their extracurricular involvement. From that brief survey, it seems that all respondents, white and black, were fairly involved in a variety of organizations, which led me to believe that the results I was seeing for black women were not

unique to their specific organization. The interviews were all conducted from September to November of 2014.

e. Sample Demographics

After changing my recruiting methods and sample several times as detailed above, I completed 16 interviews, with eight black and eight white women; one respondent from both groups defined themselves as mixed race, which is something that I kept in mind as I analyzed the data. All respondents were students at the large Midwestern university I sampled from and identified as female. The median age of respondents was 20. When asked to describe their body size on the pre-screen survey, there was a mix of responses ranging from normal to overweight, with the majority saying normal weight. Only one respondent described her body as being underweight. See Table 1 (in the appendix) for more specific demographic characteristics of this sample.

f. Methods

At the beginning of each interview, I handed the interviewee a consent form (see appendix) and read the most important parts of the consent form out loud, including the confidentiality rules and their ability to skip any question or drop out of the study at any time. All participants signed the consent form and agreed to proceed with the interview. All interviews were completed in person, with all but one occurring in the undergraduate library. I aimed to find a location that was both private and public, which would allow the interviewee to feel comfortable opening up in the interview and allow them to feel safe meeting someone they had never met

before. None of the respondents passed on any question and all completed the entire interview. At the end, the participants received their compensation for participating and were thanked for their participation.

I transcribed all the interviews verbatim, except in the case that the interviewee's wording would have been too confusing to the reader and interrupted the reader's understanding. These changes were minor and the meaning or content of the interviewees was kept intact. At any points when the interviewee said their own name or the name of someone they knew, I omitted the name or placed pronouns where appropriate when transcribing the interviews.

g. Interview Questions

The interview was very structured and followed an interview guide (see appendix) that I created prior to the interviews and after doing the literature review. I tested the guide on several people to ensure that none of the questions were confusing and that the order of the interview made sense. To start, I asked each woman to give me some background on herself and the community that she was coming from. This allowed me to have a better understanding of the respondent's racial and socioeconomic background, which could possibly contribute to her understanding and formation of body image. The next set of questions focused on first thoughts about her own body and body size; with these I was hoping to understand her formation of body image and awareness of body size. My respondents were then asked to define body image in their own terms. In the middle of the interview, I used a show card depicting a spectrum of female body sizes, without indicating the BMI (see Figure 2) to ask about the particular language they

used to describe certain bodies and to talk about which bodies they preferred the most or least for themselves. The next section asked them to imagine a friend who was participating in a body project, which is any method to lose weight, including diet, exercise, diet pills, or eating disorders, and reflect on their feelings about different weight loss methods. We then spoke about respondents' relationships with doctors and exercise plans. The interview ended with questions about their relationship with their body since entering college.
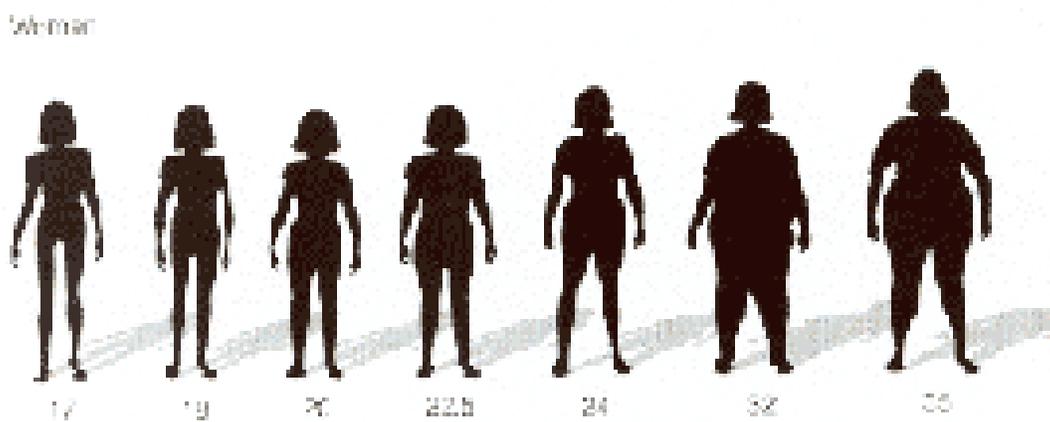
Figure 2. Depictions of female bodies at different BMI levels, ranging from 17 to 35.

h. Analysis and Coding

After transcribing all of my interviews, I used NVivo software to code the data through the virtual sites program at the university I attend. In order to save coding files on both my computer and the remote network, I used an application called Fugu.

I initially coded all interviews for themes that I had read about during my literature review and information that came up frequently in the interviews. These included topics like comparing bodies and body image influences. After developing

general codes, I went through the interviews a second time to give more specificity to the broad codes I had established. Using the smaller codes, I was able to group them together into similar categories that would ultimately form the subheadings of my results section. This listing became my codebook and the outline to my paper.

VI. Results

a. Body Image Definition

Cooley's looking glass self concept (LGS) coincides with what women in my study said when they talked about how they think about body image. Most of them (14 out of 16) mentioned something about body image being "how you see yourself." Nearly half (n=6) also brought up the idea that their body image was formed not just by their own view of their bodies, but also by the perception of how they felt others viewed their bodies.

Devin, an 18-year-old white female, said, "I guess how somebody feels about the way their body looks. Like the way their body looks to them and to others and how that makes them feel." Anna, a 20-year-old black female, commented that:

> Body image is like the view of how you view yourself and your body
> and others too. Because body image reflects, just like identity, it's a
> social identity and a personal identity, like how you feel about
> yourself and how others view you and then they both bounce off of
> each other. Because if you're confident in yourself, other people will
> see that and they won't think that you're insecure, but if you don't feel
> good about yourself and other people see that, then other people will
> see that and it'll be a double whammy. So I think body image is like
> the view of your own body and others.

Both of these quotes reflect the tenets of the LGS: that how someone feels about their body image, and moreover, their body, is a direct result of how others seem to perceive them.

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Rachel, a 20-year-old white female, described an exercise they saw in a movie where a woman was told to draw on a piece of paper what she believed the outline of her body to look like. After that, someone helped her to draw her actual body outline on the piece of paper next to her perception of herself. Looking back at them, she was shocked by how much smaller her actual outline was than what she had believed herself to be. This example further points to the fact that women's body image is so often much more than physical body size and one's own idea of their body. Instead, a myriad of other sources play contributing roles in how we end up viewing ourselves. The woman in the movie described above likely was holding feelings about how others viewed her body or about how she felt that her body compared to the ideal body as dictated by society. This echoes Mead's concept of the social self, which encompasses both the broader, generalized other, and the opinions of significant others in the more immediate environment.

Emily, a 19-year-old black female, said, "I think that like body image is how comfortable you feel with how your body looks when you look at your body or how you, maybe its actually how you perceive your body in your mind. " When I asked her to elaborate on this, she explained that perception was not the same thing as how an individual might actually look. Again, this example points to the power of perception and how what you think others think about your body can be much more powerful than physical evidence of your actual size.

It is important to note here that we are talking about a person's perceptions of what other people think, and not what those others might actually think about someone else's body. This is the same as what Cooley defined as the LGS, where the

individual imagines their self through mere perceptions of what they thought the other person might see. I believe this is important for the study of body image because it shows how much of this definition is formed by others and by society's ideal body.

b. Body Image Formation

1. How women acquired their body image

While there were many individual people, groups of people and activities that made women more aware of their body image, it is just as important to talk about the *processes* by which respondents became conscious of their bodies. There were four main ways that women came to understand themselves. These were: remarks about their body by others, comments about how others looked from significant others, seeing peers' self-consciousness about their bodies, and by comparing their body to how others looked.

The most seemingly obvious manner through which a woman came to understand her body was through comments by others about her own body. Jennifer, a 20-year-old white woman who revealed during the interview that she had struggled with anorexia, talked about the comments her family members used to make about her size: "I was like a chubby child, so my father always was like very big about body image and regularly in my childhood told me I was fat, which is, go figure, why I was anorexic." These comments, usually from a significant other, helped the women to form their own opinion of what they thought a desirable body looked like, which had lasting impacts on their own weight management.

Sometimes, it was merely enough to be around a significant other when they were commenting on a strangers' body size to make the woman understand how she should feel about her own body. This was common with mothers who made negative remarks when they saw overweight people. Beth, a 20-year-old, black female, said:

> I'd probably want to say my mom was an influence. She's very healthy and very active, but she's also sometimes critical of like people who are overweight. So I didn't realize it then, but now I'm kind of realizing that had an influence probably on how I wanted my body to be or how I thought it should be.

Knowing how her mother felt about obesity and people who were obese had a strong influence on how Beth understood a desirable body image. This action had the effect of making their daughters aware of the kind of body that they should or should not have.

Most of the white respondents and some of the black respondents talked about having an experience with someone who had an eating disorder. Often, the respondent would talk about how seeing a friend become self-conscious about her body and the food she ate would affect their own opinion of their body or their eating habits. Jaclyn, a white respondent, said about her friend who had an eating disorder:

> I feel uncomfortable around her sometimes, because we both know that we both know, but we don't really talk about it. And just like, it's hard being around her, because I notice her noticing herself. She'd be like touching herself, to, I don't know, putting her hand on her stomach and feeling it, looking at other people, or like when we would be eating together, she like wouldn't eat.

Jaclyn's experience demonstrates how watching a friend experience body insecurity and take part in a body project had an impact on how she felt about her own body.

She became uncomfortable around her friend who had an eating disorder, because

Jaclyn found herself becoming more aware of her own body and the food she chose

to eat. Having these relationships was very influential in shaping how participants

saw and developed feelings about themselves.

Finally, it was very common for women, regardless of race, to come to

understand their bodies through comparisons of their body with others around

them, usually friends or school peers. Andrea told a story about buying a dress for

her bat mitzvah that helped her to place her body in relation to others:

> There was this store that everyone went to called Cinderella's Castle, I
> couldn't fit in anymore because the dresses just, well my mom would
> say they were too short. So I went to Neiman Marcus and bought a
> dress…that was when I started to realize that my body isn't normal in
> comparison to what the rest of my peers look like.

These realizations were often at an early age when women were forming their first

opinions about their own bodies. Experiences where they could see notable

similarities or differences between themselves and others their own age were highly

influential in shaping how these women comprehended their bodies and created

their personal body image.

As Cooley's *Looking Glass Self* (1902)*,* and symbolic interactionism more

widely, explained, much of the individual's sense of self is formed by interaction

with others. This proves to be the case with body image as well. Relationships and

exchanges with significant others ultimately help the individual to form an opinion

of their own body. Other people's actions and attitudes toward the women's bodies,

dieting or exercising often end up influencing the individuals as well.

At the end of the interview, Julie, a 20-year-old black female, made a comment that exemplified how dependent self-image is on the opinions of others. When asked how she felt significant others contributed to how she felt about her body and if they made her feel better or worse about the conception she has of her body, she answered, "Yeah, I think so. Just because those are people that I care about their opinion, so what they say matters." This demonstrates that women's body image is influenced by the beliefs and thoughts that others have of them—particularly by the opinions of those the women value most.

Some of the people that play an important role in shaping the body image of women are their family, friends, men, people they're in relationships with, and other girls their own age. I turn now to evidence on these influential others that I gathered from my interviews.

2. Family

Families played a very influential role in how the college women in my study came to understand their body image and their body size. This influence came in many different forms. Parents, especially, played a particularly instrumental role in shaping a young women's view of herself and her body.

The most obvious way that parents contributed to shaping their daughter's self- perception was through negative messages they gave to their daughters, remarking on either their weight or their clothing choices. Rachel, a 20-year-old, self-identified overweight, white female shared that her mom had affected both her own and her sister's weight:

> My sister who is also kind of overweight, but she plays sports, she's more of a tomboy. She told me in confidence, but it doesn't matter for this interview, that she blames our mom for her weight, because she's always nagging us about it.

I followed up by asking if she felt that this was a factor in her own weight and she explained it likely was a contributing factor. Rachel later went on to say that media was the really big problem for women's body image issues today. While possibly true, I think this points to the fact that people are more quick to blame "the media" as opposed to naming their significant others who might have an equally, if not more, powerful influence on young girl's minds.

Andrea, another 20-year-old, self-identified overweight, white respondent recalled a time when her parent had commented negatively on her weight. She said, "I'll go home for the holidays and my dad will be like 'you shouldn't be wearing leggings. Why would you wear that? You don't have the body for that'." She went on to talk about how sad it made her to hear her dad say these things, but that because he was also overweight, that she didn't take what he had to say as seriously. She later mentioned how her boyfriend was the only good influence she had in her life in terms of her body. Thus, while she discredited her father's opinion, she was also aware that it had a negative impact on her body image. Interestingly, both Andrea and Rachel said that the parent who was nagging them about their weight was overweight themselves.

Another way that family, usually mothers, influenced their daughters' body image was much more subtle. Instead of outright criticizing or nagging their daughter about their body, these moms impacted their daughters through their lifestyles or beliefs. The story with Beth, as told above, is similar to many women's

stories about how their understanding of other's feelings toward unattractive

bodies helped them to decide what was desirable to them. Beth's mom's opinion of

others who were overweight helped her to shape her own feelings of overweight

people and being overweight herself. Because daughters so often look up to their

mothers, it is not surprising that they were so influential.

Emily, a 19-year-old black female, reinforced this idea by saying, "My mom is

very, very, she's not small, but like she and I are the same size now, and she's 25

years older than me. So for me, I almost feel that pressure, and maybe I put it on

myself, but I need to be, I need to look just as good as she does when I'm older."

Mothers who were very in shape or at a normal weight, whether or not they were

aware of the effect they had on their daughter, seemed to provide a sort of invisible

force in their daughter's life. As Emily illustrated, her mother's maintenance on her

body gave her an ideal body to strive for, which inevitably lead to additional

pressure on her to follow in her mother's footsteps. In these ways, mothers

influenced their daughters through serving as models of "desirable" behavior or

through comments about others, in addition to directly criticizing them.

Many of my respondents talked about their families' weight throughout the

interview. This was either to use family as a standard to measure themselves or as a

way to justify their own weight, as in the case of Courtney, an 18-year-old black

female. She said: "All of my family is overweight and so, we don't really talk about it.

I know my mom is like really self-conscious about her weight, but we don't really do

nothing about it." While her family didn't talk about weight directly, by not talking

about it, she was able to see how being overweight had affected her mom and as a result, Courtney herself.

3. Peers

Peers who were the same age as the women I interviewed were also important contributors when it came to body image formation. From friends to boyfriends to other girls who they looked up to, peers seemed to have an even larger influence than family on women in college as they shaped their view of themselves,

Courtney, who described herself as overweight, mentioned that her friends played a unique role in her body image formation, because they never directly said anything negative about her body. She recalled:

> My friends say like 'oh you're not even that big' like they always say you're not big, but I feel like it's kind of contradictory, because they're the same ones that are always calling themselves fat, and I'm just like you're at least 16 sizes lower than me, so if you're fat, what am I?

By talking about themselves in a negative way, Courtney's friends made her feel negatively about her own body. She wasn't the only respondent to mention that friends had this effect on her. Sara, a normal weight white respondent, talked about a friend who had been anorexic and how this made her question her own weight and body security, when she felt obviously larger than her friend. This points to the fact that female friends have a very profound effect on one another, even when not speaking about the particular topic of body size or weight.

Boys or significant others also had an impact on how confident or insecure women felt about their bodies. For most of my respondents, boys were a positive

influence, except in the scenario that the woman found herself wanting to get more attention from guys. Jaclyn, a 20-year-old white woman, talked about the positive influence her boyfriend had on her own body image:

> My partner is great and he is very supportive and anytime I say anything negative, he says that's not true and you look fantastic. He's awesome. I think that's definitely a part of my growing confidence, because we've been dating since high school, so like there's been a transition in our relationship of my idea about myself and how I am attractive.

Even throughout what she considered a transformative time for her body image, Jaclyn's boyfriend provided her with a source of positive body image and confidence.

More than one girl talked about breaking up with a boyfriend and mentioned the impact that had on her body image. When asked how her body image had changed since entering college, Andrea talked instead about how her presentation of self changed after her breakup with a long-term boyfriend:

> Because I'm thinking about being more desirable to other people whereas I already have this in the bag, so I don't really care. Clearly I don't care still. But like when I go out, I'm a lot more conscious of how I look, whereas before I would go out in anything, I didn't really care what I looked like. And so I think that's changed, because I think more about body image in relation to other people. Whereas before, I was more focused on myself.

This is evidence of the effect that relationship status can have on a women's sense of body confidence or insecurity. While she was dating, Andrea focused less on how others saw her, which suggests that boyfriends mediated participants' sense of self-confidence. This fact remained true throughout the interviews, regardless of race or age.

It is interesting to compare the reactions that women had to comments made by friends versus those made by boys about the same part of their body. When asked how they thought friends, family or boys had contributed to how she felt about her body, Emily, a 20-year-old black woman, said:

> My friends contribute to how I look at my body. Because they'll be like you used to have no butt and now you have one and it's so big and it makes me feel self-conscious. But then I'll be with my boyfriend and he'll be like wow, your butt looks great.

It is worth noting that such different comments on the same body parts made by different individuals in the respondent's life have such different effects on a woman's understanding of that particular body part or on her self-image. Interestingly, throughout the interviews, women talked most about significant others, like boyfriends, providing a comforting opinion to them, whereas other women seemed to be a much more negative influence.

Sara, an 18-year-old white female, talked about how beginning to compare her body to other girls made her insecure and want the attention of boys. She said:

> This new girl came to our school and she was in our friend group or whatever and she was like really tall and had like boobs and a butt and stuff. And then she went out with like the cutest guy in the school and we were like oh, it must be because like her body or whatever.

Whereas in the example above, men presented a way for women to feel more confident or secure about their bodies, Sara's story shows that boys also had the effect of creating body insecurity in women, especially when they felt others with more "desirable" bodies were getting the kind of attention they wanted.

A few girls mentioned becoming aware of their bodies when they started to hang out with kids their own age or their own sex. Mary, a 19-year-old white female, was homeschooled until high school. She talked about how starting to take PE

classes in 9th grade with others her own age made her begin to think about her body.

Andrea mentioned that when she was growing up, she didn't have to think about her

body as much, until she started hanging out with mostly girls. She said:

> I think the one thing that is and has always been helpful is that I hung
> out mostly with men and I guess boys at the time. It really helped me
> to be like we don't have the same bodies and that's okay because we
> don't have to because we're different genders.

After she began to hang out more with girls, she said that she started to feel more

body insecurity. She spent more time evaluating her body and questioning what she

thought she should look like. Spending more time with people of the same sex

caused Andrea to rethink her previously somewhat positive body image.

Rachel, a 20-year-old self-reported overweight white woman, talked about

how peers bullying her about her weight affected her view of herself and impacted

her self-confidence. She recalled that:

> It was just a comment. Well obviously she was definitely bullying and
> meant it in a bullying way, but the comment itself was just like 'you
> take up the whole chair seat' or something. Like 'your butt squishes'
> and it just paralyzed me and I was horrified, even looking back at it.

The memory was very formational to how Rachel began to see and perceive her

body. The fact that she was able to remember this time from her childhood so

vividly illustrates how influential it was on her development of body image.

Comments like these are further evidence for the impact of peer perceptions and

opinions on female body image.

4. Athletics/Dance

Respondents seemed to have two different opinions of the role of athletics

and dance in their body image formation. For some, it provided a very empowering

body confidence that made them feel better about being larger than what they considered to be normal or desirable. For others, being athletic, stronger and maybe bigger as a result were seen as bad things because they felt that the extra weight was not justifiable to others as muscle.

Andrea, a white respondent who defined herself as overweight, felt that because she did not look like a typical athlete, she couldn't use her athleticism and muscularity to justify why she was heavier than what was normally considered desirable. She remarked:

> I mean I was a varsity athlete, but I mean, I'm a lot stronger than a lot of my friends and I guess that's a thing, but even so I don't, I mean I look big, but I don't really look buff or strong or muscular, like what you would consider a female athlete to look like. So it's definitely been hard and I think as I've grown up, I've become more conscious and found ways to get around that, like oh if you wear this, it makes you look thinner and stuff like that.

This idea illustrates how for some women, only certain, accepted types of athleticism and strength were seen as positive. Being strong didn't empower or give these women the body confidence that is often assumed to accompany strength or power, as it commonly is with men.

Emily, a black respondent, had a very different experience with feeling powerful and strong. She recounted a time from her days dancing in high school:

> I was a modern dancer, which I think made me feel very secure in my body. So like in my dance company, there wasn't a lot of men, so I could, I was expected to lift girls, just like a guy would, and everyone would have the same expectation, and if someone was like I can't lift because I'm small, my dance teacher would be like, no, everyone can lift.

In her interview, it was clear that she was proud of having more muscle than the other girls in her dance class. This had the effect of giving her more confidence in

her body and making her desire to have bigger, stronger muscles, which would seem to contradict the thin ideal represented in the media for most women.

5. College environment

Many girls of both races mentioned how coming to college had changed their opinions of their body. There were many reasons for these changing feelings, some of which were the particular social atmosphere and changes in their bodies that were a result of coming to college.

Beth, a 20-year-old black female, compared her experience at the large Midwestern research university to that of her friends who attended historically black colleges. She didn't think that her friends were as enmeshed in the same culture of looking good and going out as were friends in her school, where she said Greek life was particularly prominent on campus. Therefore, large universities like the one Beth attended might have a particular social environment that impacts female body image.

Beth also talked about how coming to college meant having more options for food and drinking and less structure in your life to workout. These changes in her body gave her new awareness for the way she felt in clothes. She said:

> When I got to college, probably in second semester, I gained a little weight and I was more aware of how my body looked in certain clothes and how my body felt. Which like sucks, I wish I didn't ever, it sucks when you get that perception because once you do, it doesn't ever really go away.

Changes in the body that came about because of the unique freedoms and choices in college culture led Beth, along with other respondents, to talk about how they had become aware of their bodies in a new way. They often talked about feeling like they

needed to exercise more or diet in order to compensate for their changing bodies and new environments.

Christina, a 20-year-old white respondent, talked about the new openness she experienced when coming to college and how this influenced her understanding of her own self-image. She talked about the difference in female self-confidence between high school and college:

> You probably wouldn't even walk around in a bikini for very long [in high school]. Whereas now, any girl that is like skinny and has self-confidence will probably post a picture of herself and you have to like see those on Facebook…. I don't know if my relationship with my body has changed that much, but I'm definitely more aware of my body, relative to society now.

Changes in the relative openness and public sharing of college-aged women about their bodies caused Christina, like so many other respondents, to become more conscious of how their bodies differed from those who had the confidence to post pictures of themselves on Facebook. More often than not, this was a negative influence on women, making them feel as if they didn't have a desirable *enough* body to post photos of themselves on social media platforms. Regardless of how confident or satisfied they seemed to feel in their own bodies throughout the interviews, when talking about posting pictures to social media or being more open with their bodies in public, they seemed to become shy and less confident in their body's appearance in comparison to fellow peers and popular figures in the media.

6. Comments of physicians

Another person with whom women interacted regularly that had an effect on how they came to view their bodies was their physician. Women reported that doctors said things like "you need to gain more weight," "your BMI is too high," or

"you're on the borderline of obese." A doctor's comments on the woman's weight usually prompted one of two responses in my participants. Either the woman believed that the conversation was helpful and the doctor was just doing their job, or they believed that the doctor had overstepped his or her boundary and was being too critical of her weight.

Andrea, for example, believed that it was just a physician's job to mention things like weight, even when it was uncomfortable for them to bring up to her. When asked if she thought the doctor was out of line for saying something about her being overweight, she responded: "I didn't think so. I mean I think that's what the doctor is for. Like to evaluate those things and see if you're taking the right steps…it was like the best way they could have gone about it, especially with someone my age." She didn't allow this one opinion to have a negative impact on how she saw herself. Instead, she recognized that this was just a part of going to the doctor and that being overweight was a health concern that a doctor should be able to comment on.

Others, like Alex, an 18-year-old black woman, said that the reaction she got from her doctor led her to make changes to her body. When the physician commented that her weight was a concern, she said: "I was surprised, because I didn't think I looked that overweight. It made me feel kind of bad, so I wanted to lose weight." When asked later if this was a contributing factor in her eventual weight loss, she remarked: "I think that's when I like first realized it and then maybe after that, I was just more cautious." Alex took what her doctor said to heart and ultimately made changes to her lifestyle in order to heed the doctor's advice, which

suggests that the doctor's opinion had an effect on her own opinion of herself and her body.

7. Media

Of the many influences on body image that respondents described, the greatest number of respondents commented on the influence of the media. It was both a negative and positive influence in that it created body insecurity for some and also was upheld as a slightly unrealistic image to strive for, which most girls were aware of to a certain degree.

Devin, a white respondent who talked openly about struggling with an eating disorder previously, talked about how magazines and celebrity images created body self-doubt when she was feeling insecure about her weight. She said:

> I used to just like look at magazines whenever I was in a waiting room
> or whatever. They're all just praising their bodies and how amazing
> they are and criticizing them for gaining weight. So I definitely noticed
> that, like oh that's what people are interested in.

For Devin, as was the case with most respondents, seeing celebrities and models, and hearing what the media had to say about their bodies, helped them to form an opinion of what was desirable and accepted in society. However, as these images often show unhealthy body sizes or computer-enhanced images, the ideals they were creating for women were harmful to their understanding of their own bodies.

Some women talked about being aware of the unattainable messages that the media was sending to women through these images. Rachel, a 20-year-old white woman, talked about an instance where she disagreed with the media: "I know that like Jennifer Lawrence had a picture in a magazine semi-recently, I don't really know and they photo shopped it to make her look skinnier. Whereas, I already think she's

a healthy body weight." She went on to talk about how she didn't think that most images in magazines were healthy at all and that celebrities, in her opinion, were too skinny. This awareness about the effect of the media on body image formation was a common theme that surfaced throughout the interviews. Most women seemed to recognize that the media was creating a distorted view of "ideal" female bodies.

c. Current Body Image

When talking about body image formation and influences that helped the respondents to talk about their own bodies, most women used memories or anecdotes from the past. In general, they were talking about a time in their adolescence where a formative event or experience had altered or shifted their thinking about their selves as bodies and as individuals. These memories neglect how the unique environment of college affected, and possibly altered, women's opinions of their body. The respondents in this study were at a particular point in their lives, late teens and early twenties, to provide some insight into how college-aged women see their bodies. It is interesting to contrast these thoughts with those that helped them to first form their opinions, seeing how changed, or sometimes unchanged, they were from their original beliefs.

1. *How respondents characterize their own body*

Toward the end of the interview, respondents were asked to talk about their body image now and to think about how, if at all, it had changed since entering college. There were some common responses, such as the love/hate feeling toward their bodies, as well as uncommon responses, like the one individual, who given the opportunity to change something about her body, would keep it just as it was.

The most popular response from participants to the question about their current relationship with their body was the "love/hate" reaction. Four women said this directly, while at least another four said something similar, without using the words "love/hate." Jennifer, a 20-year-old white respondent, who talked about her eating disorder struggle said:

> I'd say it's still a love/hate relationship. I'd say it's at least more aware than it was when I was anorexic and stuff like that. They say though, just like an alcoholic, like when you come out of an eating disorder, you're never actually recovered, you're always recovering.

By saying that she is always recovering and constantly still working toward a healthy body image shows that her relationship to her body is ever changing. Jennifer's comment suggests that college might be a time when body image is particularly salient and therefore especially responsive to the environment.

On a similar note, Anna, a 20-year-old black respondent who also used the phrase "love/hate," talked about how context was so important for understanding and feeling a certain way toward her body. She commented:

> It's like a love/hate relationship. Only because I love my body when I'm just like at home in the house and chilling, but sometimes when I look in the mirror, I'm like oh my god, my arms are getting so big and my stomach is sticking out more.

Anna's changing feelings toward her body reinforce the idea that body image is context-dependent. For the participants of the study, college seemed to present as a time when body image was particularly prominent. The setting and proximity to so many people their same age made women aware of how others viewed their body, which in turn lead them to opinions of their bodies.

The very last question that respondents were given was about what types of body corrections they would make if they had the opportunity. Every single woman

gave a list of two to five things that they would immediately change or want to be different, except one. This suggests that even those women who described themselves as having a positive body image were not entirely satisfied. While it wasn't surprising to find out that most college women wanted to slim down or tone up different parts of their body, it was shocking to see that only one of the sixteen would actually choose to leave her body completely untouched:

> Interviewer: "if you could change your body, would you and what would you do?"
>
> Jessica: "I wouldn't. I wouldn't."
>
> Interviewer: "You're the only person who's said that. I've done 10 interviews already and you're the only person to say that."
>
> Jessica: "really? Oh my god. I don't know. I'm just okay. I'm happy with what I'm in, so I wouldn't change it. I'm so bad, I wouldn't change it.

This respondent stood out for being genuinely happy with how her body looked and not even talking about wanting to change it. Jessica's response to finding out that she was the only one to say this, "I'm so bad, I wouldn't change it" suggests that not only are most college-aged women feeling negatively about their bodies, but that they feel guilty if they don't feel negatively. No matter how thin or outstanding their bodies objectively appeared being confident about their body's appearance was not something they felt comfortable doing.

2. Situations that trigger comparisons/make negative body image

As stated before, so much of the woman's understanding of her body was context-dependent. Thus, there were very clear distinctions between the kinds of situations or events that caused negative body image and those that caused women to have positive body image. The negative instances almost always had to do with making comparisons between their own body and someone else's.

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The most obvious for almost all of the women, regardless of race, was being in a social or party setting. Kim, a 20-year-old black respondent, talked about getting ready for the upcoming Black Homecoming, a formal event, where most attendees dress up: "The weeks preparing up to it, I'd be like really on it with working out and what I eat and then afterwards I'm just like I'm free again! But it's all like, and it's not to say fit into my clothes, but I guess maintain like a figure." Another respondent, Beth, shared the sentiment that going out put pressure on her to look a certain way:

> I just feel like the whole college culture is like yeah, when you go out you wear this little crop top and shorts and you have to show your body. So yeah, I definitely feel like it's like that pressure to impress guys or even like other girls and just like that pressure of being perfect and showing that you have a good body.

Both of these instances refer to a woman taking note of a very particular social setting, constructed in the college environment, and working to make her body to fit in, or feeling the stress of not fitting in. Each of the explanations suggests a desire to change one's body to assimilate to a particular body type.

Nearly every respondent talked about how the media had affected her view of her body, currently and in the past. The respondent usually brought up how reading magazines reminded them that their bodies fell short of the cultural ideal.

Two other instances that came up frequently were comparing their body to others at the beach or the gym. One respondent put it well by saying: "I mean I don't think it's possible to be a woman these days and not think those things when you see another women's body." This would indicate that in society today, it has become commonplace for women to use their peers as guidelines and standards by which to hold their own body against. On the same note, two girls talked about instances

where they had a friend who was skinnier than they were, usually dealing with an eating disorder, who made them feel insecure about themselves. About her situation, Sara said: "well she's skinnier than me, so if she thinks she's fat at her body weight, does she think that I'm fat at my body weight? Because I'm obviously way more than her. It's kind of like a selfish way to look at it, but yeah." Again, this idea that women are constantly making comparisons between their bodies and their peers, models or celebrities dictates that most women will be left feeling worse about themselves, as cultural standards or ideals might not necessarily fit or be attainable for their body.

The one instance that produced negative body image in respondents that did not directly involve comparisons with others was in the case of trying on clothes. Courtney, a black respondent, talked about the experience of going shopping with her friends at the mall:

> Like if I go shopping, clothes too, they don't fit a lot. Like at a lot of stores, even at like [local mall], they don't have, their Forever 21 and H&M don't have like the plus sizes added to them. So it's kind of annoying, like when you're with all your friends and they're like oh let me get this, why don't you pick something? And I'm like, I can't.

Arguably this example still shows a woman making a comparison between her body and some constructed ideal, here the size of clothes that are sold in most stores. This is yet another example of a situation that causes a woman to think negatively about her body.

3. Situations or strategies conducive to positive body image

While the instances where women spoke about acquiring positive body image were more rare than those for negative body image, they did occur. Two of

these examples had to do with the body, while the last tactic showed women using things other than the body to produce a positive self-view.

The first example is one prompted by the feeling of athleticism or strength in their bodies. Emily, the 19-year-old black modern dancer who looked thin, but muscular, talked about how being a dancer gave her confidence in her body. She shared that being stronger than her peers gave her more opportunities and advantages as a dancer. This example shows an instance where strength was privileged over appearance; therefore, Emily felt confident in her body's strength and didn't worry about size. Because she was more muscular than the other dancers, she was valued for her size rather than criticized for it.

Having a supportive and accepting boyfriend also proved to be very beneficial for a woman's self-identity. Several respondents brought up how a boyfriend's comments about their body had made them feel more secure and confident in themselves. Kim shared an example from a past relationship:

> I don't have a partner, but when I was in a relationship, within like the last couple months or so, for the most part, I would say that I'm pretty comfortable with my shape, even with it fluctuating as much as it does. But his comments would make me feel even more secure.

This suggests that women's ideas of themselves are still very rooted in how others view and perceive their bodies, even when they have reached college age. This point supports Cooley's Looking Glass Self concept, which would suggest that body image is ongoing and context-dependent. Comments from a man gave women a positive body image because it reassured them to know that their bodies were admired and desirable to someone.

Both of the above scenarios relate to or revolve around a woman's own or someone else's feelings about her body. However, it was also common for women to find positive body image in situations that had nothing to do with bodies. Rachel, a 20-year-old white respondent talked about why she didn't let body image become all-consuming: "Part of the reason that I'm not too focused on body image is because I'm not too focused on dating or anything. I'm super career-oriented." Anna, a 20-year-old black respondent mentioned something similar: "I like to work out when I have the time, but it's so hard being a college student and I have two jobs and I'm a full time student. So working out doesn't always fit into my schedule. Once I get home, I'm tired." Both these women talked about having priorities that were more important to them than their bodies. Having other focuses or concerns gave them less time to dwell on how others perceived their bodies, which seemed to create a somewhat more positive self-image. Arguably, though, this could be labeled as body indifference rather than actual body confidence.

Both of the respondents that talked about being previously affected by anorexia also brought up the idea of taking away the power body image had over them. Jennifer talked about how coming out of anorexia gave her a new sense of ownership over her body. Instead of thinking about how to make her body look for others, she was focused on looking good for herself. Devin, who also suffered from anorexia, said that if someone with an eating disorder asked for her advice she would: "Really tell them to get help because body image isn't everything, bodies aren't everything and there's a lot more to a person." These examples show that

regaining a sense of control or pride over one's body image often means redirecting thoughts away from the body itself.

d. Body Categorization

Until now, we have discussed how the women come to understand their own body image and what they currently think about their bodies. This next section will talk about how the respondents in the study talked about and categorized bodies. This steps away from the individual and looks at cultural conceptions of bodies. In other words, this section will look at how women talked about what they believed to be desirable bodies versus undesirable bodies by societal or cultural standards.

1. Conceptions of a normal/ideal body

During the interviews, the respondents were asked to talk about what a normal body looked like to them. More often than not for my respondents, normal became equated with ideal or desirable, and they listed out traits that would not describe the average American, but rather someone five or six sizes smaller. The average American women, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), is 166 pounds and has a waist circumference of 37.5 inches (see reference at http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/body-measurements.htm). When cross referenced with a typical sizing chart for contemporary women's clothing stores, this represents a size 16, much larger than what women were describing as normal. There were many different aspects of the body that women mentioned and specific words that they associated with a "normal" or "ideal" body.

Several respondents brought up height when talking about a normal or ideal body. They did not describe one perfect size, but rather talked about height in

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relation to others, particularly boys. Jennifer, a 20-year-old white respondent, explained it this way:

> I guess I'm not a fan of like a tall woman. When I was little, I wanted to be 5'7" because my mom was 5'6" but then I stopped growing at 5'4" so I was like I guess I can deal with this. But now I kind of like my height because you know like boys are basically always taller than me.

Jennifer's comments suggest that being tall is not desirable for women, because they want to appeal to boys. Height is something that most women are aware of when they think about making their own bodies appealing to the opposite sex.

Being able-bodied was also talked about as being normal or ideal. Rachel talked about not wanting to be heavier because she thought that being thin would allow her to be more able-bodied and get around more easily in life, without having the extra weight to carry around. This points to the fact that not only is being able-bodied more desirable, but that being thinner is more closely associated with being able-bodied and healthy.

Ten of the sixteen respondents brought up the idea that normal bodies should be proportional. This was sometimes described using the actual word, but more often talked about by saying that nothing should be out of place on the body and that fat, bones, and muscle should be contained in particular places. Here is Jennifer's response to what a normal body looks like:

> I guess what I picture in my head is someone who's not super thin, but someone who is still like proportioned correctly, if that makes sense, like everything is still like smooth, like they have a flat stomach and like you know, a good butt and good boobs and stuff. And they're not like stick thin, but they're not, nothing's like sticking out either.

Many other women, of both races, shared this idea, which demonstrates that it is widely accepted as a standard with which women measure themselves.

When women talked about normal bodies, there was always an emphasis on being within some proper weight range. Often the respondent didn't have exact numbers, but knew there to be an appropriate place, between under and overweight, where all normal and healthy women should lie. Julie, a 20-year-old black respondent, talked about why she picked bodies in the middle of the BMI chart as her top choice: "They're average I think. They're not like too far on the scale to the left, but I don't want to be too far to the right either. It's like perfectly, the size is good." This was true for most women, who picked bodies right in the middle of the BMI range. Generally, however, the ideal within that range tended on the thin side as demonstrated by this comment from Mary: "I'm like BMI of 20, which is right in the middle, between 18-25, which is the normal weight range. So I don't know, everyone looks pretty different, just as long as you're not excessively obese, you're pretty normal." Her comment suggests that being on the skinny side of the BMI chart is not nearly as abnormal as being overweight. This shows that despite the existence of an accepted range for women's weight, it was much more acceptable and encouraged for women to be on the smaller end of the continuum.

On the same note, when talking about being small, there were two different ways that most women chose to talk about body size. They either used the word thin or the word skinny. When asked how these two terms differed in their meaning, most respondents said that thin was a good thing, it was something to strive for, while being skinny was associated with being underweight or having a problem such as an eating disorder. Christina, a 20-year-old white respondent, used the word 'stick' to describe someone she thought of as thin: "I feel like when I'm thinking

about a stick, it's usually like someone who's naturally thin. Whereas if they have an actual problem and they're not naturally a stick, then they're underweight because of an eating disorder or something." Andrea, another white respondent, reinforced this idea. She talked about what kind of body she would prefer for herself: "I want to be fit, more so than being really skinny. They look toned, or what I would consider toned, whereas the other ones look really skeletal." Both of these examples suggest that while the two words may seem synonymous, they actually carry very different meanings. Being thin or toned was considered ideal or desirable, but being skinny usually was associated with having a problem or needing to seek out help for being too far underweight.

Along with mentioning things that were directly related to body size, a few women in the study also describe aspects of the body, like appearance and beauty, which were often understood as normal or ideal. Andrea described it well: "I mean I would say that I wouldn't consider anything else abnormal, but like sometimes we put the idea of normal and beautiful as one thing... this idea of the normal and beautiful is that thin, well developed and everything body." Andrea's quote demonstrates that women were not only aware of their body size and shape, but also about how they presented and prepared their bodies for others. A handful of participants expressed that caring about appearance and beauty was as important as caring about being the right weight.

Despite all of the responses that women gave about what a normal body looked like to them, there were a few who stated that normal did not exist, that normal was no longer possible, because there were so many different types of

bodies in the world. For these individuals however, they were all still able to

produce a culturally acceptable version of normal. Take Beth, a 20-year-old black

respondent, for example:

> I mean I don't think there's any type of normal body, but I guess I
> would say…that's really hard. I guess like proportional and kind of
> looking like the average size for that person's height and weight, so
> um I guess more on the thinner side, I guess you would say.

The fact that women who admit there is no normal are still able to describe what

they think to be acceptable, suggests that body image and body ideals are so

pervasive in society that college-aged women are able to come up with a description

of what they think a body should look like. It also shows that while women may say

they are not trying to fit their bodies to a certain mold, that this mold is ever-present

and almost inescapable in society.

2. Conceptions of an abnormal/undesirable body

In the same way that what was normal was considered to be ideal and

desirable, what was abnormal was also equated with what was undesirable. In most

ways, they represented the opposite of what women talked about when referring to

normal bodies. The main things that women mentioned as being undesirable,

besides being obese, were being extremely skinny, tall, disproportionate or having

physical deformities.

As stated earlier, there was a marked difference between the definitions of

thin and skinny. As respondent Mary said: "I mean it's just weird sometimes when

you see someone who is very underweight and clearly starving themselves or

whatever, and then if you see someone who looks really healthy, but they're very

thin framed. It's a little bit of a difference." For most women, being skinny was a bad

thing, whereas being thin was something to aspire to. Kim, a 20-year-old black

woman, described skinny: "So, not normal as far as underweight, like extensive

bones like popping out or bulging or like extreme definition." Several other women

in the study agreed with this statement and reinforced the idea that being

noticeably skinny to the point that it seemed unhealthy was an undesirable trait.

Just as being shorter than men was considered a good thing, women also

talked about not wanting to be too tall, because it might make them less appealing to

boys. Jennifer shared an anecdote about a friend of hers who was very tall: "One of

my friends is like 6 feet tall and she's really self-conscious about that because you

know like boys are a lot shorter than her, so she always crouches down in pictures."

This suggests that being tall is not ideal and that women who are tall often feel like

they need to hide that fact.

Along the same lines, being disproportionate or not having what was

considered to be the "right" shape was believed to be undesirable. Christina, a 20-

year-old white respondent, explained the difference between the sixth and seventh

bodies (see figure 2) on the BMI chart:

> Like this person might just naturally be big, but they aren't obese
> based on this picture because they still have defined body parts and
> defined shape. Their waist is still smaller than their hips. Whereas this
> person, even if they were naturally big, they still might overeat,
> because they don't have any of the normal proportion curves left.

This quote demonstrates how being overweight and still having the proper curves

and proportions was more acceptable than just being overweight. It was acceptable

to be "naturally big," which meant that you might just be bigger boned or come from

a bigger family. As long as the person still exhibited some semblance of idealized womanly form, with curves, it was okay to be heavier set.

One last thing that a few respondents talked about as being undesirable for a women's body was having physical deformities. Respondent Devin said: "Well, so I don't want to attach a stigma to it, but when you see people missing a limb, it's not normal." Physical deformities weren't mentioned specifically by many, but a lot of women did talk about how they believed a normal body to have the standard two arms, two legs, ten fingers, and ten toes, which would suggest that most women believed a normal body to be whole and without physical defects.

e. Ranking bodies – Quantitative Data (see figure 2 in Methods)

Half way through the interview, the respondents were shown outlines of 7 women ranging in size from underweight BMI (below 18.5) to obese (over 30). As shown in Figure 2, these images were in order from smallest to largest. I removed the actual BMI number associated with each image so that respondents could not associate any one picture with a numerical BMI value. The respondents were asked to describe the bodies using words they would say to their friends in conversation. They were also asked to rank the bodies from most desirable to least desirable, according to their own opinion.

On the whole, most (13) respondents placed the third, fourth and fifth bodies (BMI of 20, 22.5, and 24, respectively) as the most desirable, with a few placing the second body as their second or third most desirable. There were two exceptions to this. Andrea, a 20-year-old overweight white woman, picked the fifth body (BMI = 24) as most desirable. She also preferred the sixth and seventh figures (BMI of 32

and 35) over the smaller first and second bodies (BMIs of 17 and 18). This set her apart from the other participants. However, as she was the only overweight white woman in the sample to say this, it is hard to say why she presented this way. When talking to her, it seemed that she was somewhat more aware of the role that body image played in her life and how influences like media had rubbed off on herself and her peers, which could have manifested itself in how realistic she chose to be with her ideals.

Courtney, an 18-year-old, black, and self-reported overweight respondent, was the other exception to the general pattern. She picked the smallest body on the scale as her most desirable. When asked why she desired that body, she explained: "ultimately, I want to be able to wear a crop top. My goal for right now is just to feel comfortable, and I would feel comfortable in this [pointing to number 4], but in this [pointing to number 1], I would just feel like the best ever." This was unique to Courtney, as many of the respondents at this point of the interview, pointed to the first body and remarked at how bony and thin it looked, suggesting that given the opportunity to, they would not want to look like the first body at all.

Courtney's comment was shocking to hear, as it represented something so outside the norm of what I had heard from most women. However, it was consistent with the rest of her interview, in that she seemed especially focused on looking thin. She even mentioned her desire to lose weight was rooted in appearance rather than health reasons:

> I think the right reason is just for me to be healthy, because I'm putting stress on my joints and I have torn ligaments, so I have health problems because of my weight, but I feel like I'm not doing it to be healthy, but I'm doing it more because I want to lose weight, because I

want to be thin. It's not for my body to be healthy, it's because I want to look good.

Therefore, even though Courtney presented a contradiction to the other women in the study, she was consistent throughout her interview in showing her desire for a thin, attractive body. It is still difficult to say what was causing Courtney to feel so strongly about this.

Despite these interesting outliers, for the most part, responses were very similar for most women, regardless of age, race or self-designated body size. Most women picked the three middle bodies as the most desirable. From there, they would pick the first and second bodies before choosing the sixth and seventh. This suggests that women are either led to desire a thinner body because society has taught them to do so or because they found it more acceptable to say that they preferred a thinner body to an overweight one.

While it might seem uninteresting at first to see that all women have ordered the bodies in relatively the same way, it is useful to note how these similarities hold true across race groups, which is counter to the expectations set up by previous literature and to what I expected to find. This suggests that while there is a commonly held idea about black female bodies being bigger and curvier, there is still a dominant and consistent narrative amongst all of the women I spoke with about what types of bodies are desirable.

f. Bodies and Race/ethnicity

One question the respondents were asked during the middle of the interview was to think about whether or not they believed certain types of bodies to belong to certain types of people. This question was attempting to understand how people

understood bodies to be categorized, whether it is by gender, race, class or something else. Most women initially spoke about the obvious differences they thought separated men's bodies from women's bodies. Several however, talked about differences they had noticed, either growing up or presently, between the bodies of different races.

Even when most respondents acknowledged that they thought all bodies were different, they still could conjure up ideas of what the media or society had defined for different race groups. Respondent Jessica, 19-years-old and black, was one of these individuals. Her response to the question of whether there are certain types of bodies for certain types of people was:

> No, no, no. Definitely not. Because the white girls can be all shapes and sizes too. So no, anybody can be any shape or size. But the general sense is that black women are thicker, which is true. But there are some white girls who are naturally thick as well, just big boned.

This suggests that while on the individual level, women might feel that they have deconstructed stereotypes about race groups; the larger message from society pervades and creates stark divisions between races.

> Jennifer, 20-years-old and white, said something similar:

> I think there are definitely stereotypes, I guess like black women have like bigger butts. And as a white woman with zero to negative butt, I guess I can agree with that. And then there's like Iggy Azalea who has like a mountain on her behind, so I mean I guess there are the stereotypes and stereotype is never like a hard and fast rule, so there are always going to be exceptions. I mean there are different body types, but I don't think I associate one body type with a certain type of person.

Despite the fact that most women made a point of expressing to the interviewer that stereotyping bodies was not okay and that they could list a dozen people who did

not fit into the molds, they all were well aware of the exact ideas that were out there

being reinforced by their friends, family and the media.

One respondent talked about a similar question that had come up when she

was talking to her father about a doctor's appointment. Kim, a 20-year-old, self-

reported overweight, black respondent, told this story:

> I never made those kind of distinctions, but my dad would say stuff. I
> would tell him about how I went to the doctor and they classified me
> as being overweight, or even near obese towards my heavier days,
> and he would say stuff like well, I don't think the doctor takes into
> account us being black and how we have heavier frames in
> general…but that was the only time I kind of said okay, maybe there's
> a distinction and it kind of normalizes for me, like okay, you know, for
> the culture background that I come from, this is normal to look this
> way.

This example demonstrates how women might understand body size differences

across race groups. It also shows how a belief about racial differences might have

effects on behavior that could potentially lead to disparities in obesity prevalence.

For example, Kim understood her being overweight or heavier as a racially

acceptable thing; therefore, she wasn't as concerned with losing weight because her

size was normalized in the context of her race.

g. Race of community and effects on body categorization

Generally, throughout the interviews I conducted, as shown in the section on

quantitative data, ideas about bodies were relatively similar for both races. There

was one slight variation in the body image of black and white women. White women

seemed to present a desire for a somewhat more thin form and seemed to rely on

the opinions of media and others slightly more than black women did. Black women

often described themselves as wanting to be thicker or curvier, rather than thin and

skinny. When asked what a normal body looked like to them, most, if not all, white women responded by saying normal meant staying within the "normal weight range" or being able-bodied. For example, one respondent said: "Like not underweight, not overweight. I don't know how to describe it other than that." Black women on the other hand, when asked the same question, said things like "full-figured," "a little pudge," or "having more meat than being skinny." White women did often bring these terms up in their interviews as well, however, it was often referring to new ideals in the media that they had noticed or were happy to see becoming popular.

One contradiction to this however, was when the black woman had attended high school in predominantly white areas. This seemed to reverse the body image ideals of the black women and might provide further evidence that peers are an incredibly influential group on female body image. This was the case with four of the eight black women that were interviewed. Throughout the interview with these four women, it became clear that they had slightly different body image concepts than their black counterparts who had attended predominantly black schools. In many ways, the body image influences they described, as well as the desirable bodies they talked about, were closer to what the majority of white women described in their interviews.

Andrea, a white respondent, talked about having a black nanny when she was growing up and how being exposed to her nanny and to her nanny's community changed the way she understood body image and bodies. She commented that these experiences in communities predominantly of color changed the way she saw

normal: "Normal was different for different races too. I would say that it was with black women, they're more curvy and voluptuous and that's really prized in their community, but in white communities and white standards are so different." This illustrates the point that body image varies by race and that standards of beauty are incredibly dependent on the environments and people who determine them. It also shows that women are aware of the race-specific norms that are in place for them.

Jessica, a 19-year-old black respondent, described going to a predominantly white, upper middle class Catholic girl's high school. She described the desire to fit in with her white classmates: "I mean I wasn't like fat, but I guess I was kinda like, I kinda saw it as I have to be like thin and kinda fit to like fit in with my white classmates. But like some of my black classmates were like bigger and I guess more like curvy and stuff." When I pressed her further to ask why she thought her black classmates who were bigger didn't feel the same desire to be thin, she said:

> I think it was because they were kind of okay with who they were
> friends with, because I mean we were all kind of friends, but it was
> like black people over here and white people over here and I kinda
> tried to do like both, so that might be the reason why.

This quote demonstrates that peer groups are incredibly influential on female body image. It also demonstrates that black women, when raised in a predominantly white community, would seem to assimilate to the incredibly pervasive and dominant white body image ideals presented to them by their peers and the media.

Another black respondent, Alex, talked about comparing her body to the white girls and friends she had in high school: "Just like seeing high school, everyone was like a certain image and looking at like movies and stuff. I just wanted to be like the other girls, I just wanted to lose weight before I got to high school so I could start

over." Using white girls as a reference and comparison point for Alex meant that she was motivated to lose weight and fit in with the majority white culture of her high school.

Emily, a thin black respondent who went to a predominantly white school, described a time when two new black students came to her school in the fourth grade and called her an "oreo." She described what it meant to be called this offensive term:

> It's like a person that like is black, but they act like a white person, so the way they speak, the things they're interested in, and all of those things are I guess what people perceive as white. But for me, like I didn't really think about it like that.

While I think the term is offensive, I think it defines a real phenomenon that I was witnessing in the four respondents who reported that they had attended high school with a majority of students from a different race than them. The idea that someone from one race might be taking on a different race's body image ideal based on the group that they find themselves surrounded by supports the idea that one race can "perform" as another in certain categories of life. It further reinforces how important context is to defining what you find acceptable or what you aspire to. This same concept can be applied to black women who were thinner and from a black person's point of view might appear to be conforming to what could be described as a "white body ideal." Together, this points to the fact that peer groups and social environment are incredibly powerful shapers of body image in young adult women.

VII. Discussion

In this study, I set out to learn how college-aged women define the term body image and what factors were most influential in helping them to form their own

body image. Specifically, I looked at two different race groups, to compare how body image might differ for white and African American women. Previous research explored how relationships and people helped adolescent women to understand body image, but few sources attempted to understand how women explain the term body image or looked at how these understandings might vary by race.

As opposed to the social psychology literature that looks at individual definitions of body image, this study used sociological theorists Durkheim and Cooley to understand how body image is socially and culturally defined. Most women in the study understood their body image in the Looking Glass Self manner, which means that they perceived their own bodies through how they thought others saw themselves and that this idea was defined by the individual's social milieu, meaning it was subject to change as social environment changed. My framing builds on previous literature that argues that women's body image is influenced by many external contexts, like media and relationships with health professionals, partners and other women (Paquette and Raine 2004).

This study also looked at the factors that were most influential on a women's sense of her body image. Family, peers, physicians, college environment and media were some of the most prominent and instrumental forces that shaped how a woman came to see her body. This result confirmed prior research that showed peer groups and parents to be contributing factors in a woman's understanding of herself. Because the interviews were conducted with college-aged women at a large Midwestern university, the respondents also expressed how the social environment

of college prompted unique feelings about the body that might not have been expressed at other times throughout the life stage.

The interviews showed that women in this study categorized bodies into groups of desirable and undesirable in very similar ways, despite their own race. The slight exception to this was that when asked what a normal body looked like, white women would talk about remaining within some commonly understood weight limits, aiming toward the thin side of the range. Black women however, emphasized that normal could also mean being full-figured or having a little "pudge" or "meat on their bones." This difference suggests that there are different cultural ideas of what normal or desirable bodies look like.

Another interesting and noteworthy finding was how black women raised in predominantly white neighborhoods differed from their counterparts raised in predominantly black neighborhoods. For women raised in these areas, ideas about normal bodies seemed to be similar to their white friends' ideals. This phenomenon demonstrates how social environment and peer groups are potentially more powerful influences than family or culture on female body image, lending further support to some of the previous literature about peer groups having a strong influence on women's understanding of their self-image.

While I believe that I made novel contributions to the field of Sociology, this study, like every study, has some limitations that must be addressed for future research. Given that I was using a sample from an elite Midwestern university, I know that my respondents are not representative of the larger population. The women in this study represent a particular group of people who are college-

educated and mostly middle to upper middle class. This makes their experiences very different from those of women who are unable to pursue a college degree at an elite university. For example, it could be that college-educated black women have been more influenced by mainstream, white media, which would have impacts on the results that I found.

One way of remedying this problem would be to recruit a variety of respondents from differing education levels and types, including universities, community colleges, historically black colleges, and those who are not enrolled in post-secondary education. This might provide a slightly more representative sample of women and might yield results that provide more racial and SES variation, which would make this type of study more generalizable. As the present study contained a highly selective sample, all of whom belonged to a similar age group and were living and studying in the same general environment at this university, it might have been expected that there would be little difference between the black and white female groups given the similarities in their contemporaneous social environmental influences. Given more variation in such environments (across universities, outside of the university environment, in different regions of the U.S., etc.), more racial differences might have been found in body image formation and beliefs, which could be important for understanding broader patterns of variation in body size by race. Further research would need to work with larger, more heterogeneous samples or with different populations in order to test this idea further.

As my research focused solely on college-aged women, it is hard to know if body image is a particularly salient identity at this stage in life or if all women,

regardless of age, might have similar beliefs about body image. Tiggemann's (2004) research shows that body image is relatively constant throughout the life course, but that as women age, the importance of bodies decreases. This idea suggests that as women age, they give up some of the power of the observer's perspective as their primary view of their bodies. This contrasts with how younger women seem to privilege the opinion of others when forming their own attitude of themselves. This information suggests that interviewing only college-aged women wouldn't provide a representative sample of women at all life-course stages. However, interviews with women at this age do provide a unique look into the effects of the college context on a women's body image.

Additionally, given the time and resources available to me, I was only able to interview sixteen women, which definitely limited the generalizability of my study. It is very possible that had I interviewed fifty white women and fifty black women, I might have found greater differences in the way that body image was formed by race.

As a thin, white interviewer, I also realize that some of my own identities might have played a role in how respondents chose to answer questions. They might have felt like they knew which answer I would want to hear from them and provided me with that, rather than their honest opinion. To mitigate some of this possible interviewer effect, it might be beneficial to explore different interviewing strategies. Different options might be to have one consistent interviewer, matching the identity of the interviewer to the identity of the participant, or varying the race,

body size, and sex of the interviewer in a large sample size to see if variation in the interviewer's characteristics would affect the answers.

Because of the limited resources and time available for this study and the similarity in the recent social and environmental influences on all the women I studied, it is difficult to conclude from my results that variations in body image do exist by race. This is particularly true because of the number of other factors that influence body size and obesity patterns in the US. There are many previously studied causes of obesity that do not include body image as a predictor. Low education, low occupational status and poverty are demographic factors that are differentially distributed across race-and-gender groups and affect access to care, resources and information regarding health behaviors and risks. Additionally, these social factors can affect environmental conditions like housing quality, pollution and crime (Lee 2011).

A low-income background, more common for those from minority race/ethnicity groups, is linked to lower knowledge about the advantages of health food and less access to stores where healthy food is easily attainable and affordable. Schools also play an influential role in teaching children about healthy eating and exercising practices. However, depending on which neighborhood one lives in, certain schools and school resources may be unavailable (Lee 2011). Additionally, a study by Reed et al. (2012) found that adolescent African American girls who ate meals with their family were more likely to have a lower BMI and consume more vegetables (Reed et al. 2012). However, as people from lower income backgrounds

might need to work more than one job in order to support their family, eating as a whole family may be less realistic for them.

Racial/ethnic disparities may also influence an individual's health care utilization, because of discrimination or language barriers, child-raising practices, and food consumption patterns (Lee 2011). These salient identities like race/ethnicity and SES play an important role in creating an individual's identity, which in turn can have very profound effects on many aspects of health that could lead to obesity. Because of the unique position of the sample in this study, many of these factors that influence obesity were likely to be similar amongst participants, which could yet again explain why there was little difference between black and white respondent's formation of body image.

Given these limitations, I still believe that interviews were the best way to conduct my research, because I was able to glean many individual experiences and stories from the women I interviewed. I feel I am better able to understand the thought process of women as they understand and form body image, as well as the way they talk about bodies and what they find desirable.

Asking how women of different races comprehend their body image is helpful for sociology, but also has larger implications for research on obesity prevalence. In addition to understanding some of the environmental, social, and institutional structures that place women of color at a higher risk of obesity, body image should be understood as another possible factor contributing to the risk of obesity. How women come to define body image can have behavioral effects that impact weight gain. Differing cultural body ideals can lead to different actions regarding things like

exercising or eating, which can ultimately affect body size. Knowing that women are so strongly influenced by the environment and people that surround them in adolescence would allow for possible public health interventions and education initiatives that might encourage healthy eating and exercise in areas where larger body sizes are the norm, as norms potentially shape behaviors. Additionally, this same idea could be applied to areas where women are more likely to feel pressure to be thin, encouraging education on eating disorders.

Interpreting body image as a social phenomenon that transcends individual thoughts and beliefs allows us to acknowledge that body image is a shared construct that is intimately connected to an individual's identity. This research is important because it shows how women understand body image, which can have larger implications on how we talk about bodies with young girls as they begin to understand and form their opinions of themselves. It is important for understanding how unhealthy behaviors might be forced upon young women by broader social influences and structures that are not concerned with their wellbeing. I also believe that this work could have implications for future understandings of health behavior and health education programs that are directed at different racial groups for information about healthy body size because it recognizes the more social aspects of body image. Instead of thinking about body image as an exclusively individual construct, these programs would focus on the larger forces (friends, media, culture) that have effects on body image.

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Appendix

Table 1: Age, Race, and Self-Defined Body Size
* All participants were given pseudonyms for confidentiality.

Name*	Age	Race	Weight	In a Relationship?
Rachel	20	White	Over	
Sara	18	White/Asian	Normal	no
Mary	19	White	Normal	
Jennifer	20	White	Normal	Yes
Devin	18	White	Under	No
Jaclyn	20	White	Normal/over	
Christina	20	White	Normal	
Andrea	20	White	Over	
Anna	20	Black	Over	
Beth	20	Black	Normal	No
Jessica	19	Black/American Indian	Normal	No
Kim	20	Black	Over	
Alex	18	Black	Normal	No
Courtney	18	Black	Over	No
Emily	19	Black	Normal	
Julie	20	Black	Normal	yes

LOOKING FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS!

Are you a female student at the University of Michigan? Would you be interested in talking about body norms and perceptions?
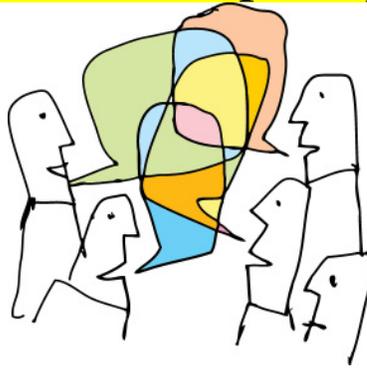
Michelle Fedorowicz is a rising senior in the Sociology Honors Program at the University of Michigan and is conducting research on how body image varies by race. She would like to interview you about your experiences with body image, body norms, and body size.

Participants will be awarded $10 after completing the interview.

Principal Investigator: Michelle Fedorowicz
Faculty Advisor: *Sarah Burgard*

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Pre-screening survey: Body Norms and Image

1.   Are you a student at the University of Michigan?

        a.   Yes

        b.   No

2.   What is your gender?

        a.   Male

        b.   Female

        c.   Other

3.   How old are you?

4.   What is your race?

        a.   White

        b.   Black

        c.   Latino/a

        d.   Arab-American

        e.   Asian

        f.   American Indian

        g.   Pacific Islander

5.   How would you describe your body size?

        a.   Underweight

        b.   Normal

        c.   Overweight

Consent to Participate in a Research Study
BODY IMAGE AND RACE: NORMS AND SELF PERCEPTION-- INTERVIEW

Principal Investigator: Michelle Fedorowicz, B.A. candidate in Sociology, University of Michigan
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Sarah Burgard, Ph.D, University of Michigan

Invitation to participate in a research study

Michelle Fedorowicz invites you to participate in a research study about body image and race to understand how race affects how individuals think about their bodies and what they think about body norms and standards.

Description of subject involvement

If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to answer a series of questions about your perception of body image in different social contexts and your understanding of body size norms and standards. You will also be shown visuals to look at and asked to answer questions regarding the visuals. The interview will be audio recorded and will last between 60 to 90 minutes.

Benefits

Although you may not directly benefit from being in this study, others may benefit because it will give a better understanding of body image varies by race and socioeconomic status among college-aged women.

Risks and discomforts

The researchers have taken steps to minimize the risks of this study. Even so, you may still experience some risks related to your participation, even when the researchers are careful to avoid them. These risks may include the following: discomfort from talking about past experiences. The risk involved in this study is minimal.

Confidentiality

We plan to publish the results of this study, but will not include any information that would identify you. There are some reasons why people other than the researchers may need to see information you provided as part of the study. This includes organizations responsible for making sure the research is done safely and properly, including the University of Michigan or government offices.

To keep your information safe, the researchers will keep all data on a password-locked device, as well as through services secured by firewall.

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Storage and future use of data

The data you provide will be stored on a voice recorder and later transferred to a computer device and transcribed in 3-6 months after the interview. After transcription, the audio recordings will be destroyed and a number will be assigned to your data that does not connect to your identity.
The researcher will retain the data for no more than 5 years.
The researcher will dispose of your data by 1/2020.
The data will not be made available to other researchers for other studies following the completion of this research study and will not contain information that could identify you. All data will be kept confidential and will not be distributed to third parties.

Voluntary nature of the study

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. If you decide to withdraw early, all existing data and recordings will be destroyed and will not be used as part of the study.

Additionally, you may refuse to answer any question for any reason, without ending the interview.

Study Compensation

For volunteering in the study, you will receive $10 in cash at the end of the interview. If for some reason you are unable to complete the interview or decide to drop out before the interview is over, you will still receive full compensation.

Contact information

If you have questions about this research, including questions about scheduling or your compensation for participating, you may contact Michelle Fedorowicz, (517) 896-4113, michfedo@umich.edu or Dr. Sarah Burgard, (734) 615-9538 sburgard@umich.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the University of Michigan Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board, 2800 Plymouth Rd., Building 520, Room 1169, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2800 (734) 936-0933, irbhsbs@umich.edu.

Consent

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By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in the study. You will be given a copy of this document for your records and one copy will be kept with the study records. Be sure that questions you have about the study have been answered and that you understand what you are being asked to do. You may contact the researcher if you think of a question later.

I agree to participate in the study.

_____
Printed Name

_____   _____
Signature   Date

Interview Guide

- Hi. How are you doing today?
- My name's Michelle Fedorowicz, I am a rising senior writing my honors thesis in sociology. Over the past semester I have done lots of research to take a closer look at and understand how women of different races experience obesity. I am hoping to gain a better understanding of body image perceptions and norms for college-aged women across three different races, which will hopefully help me to explain some of the patterns that we are seeing.
- If at any time throughout the interview you have a question, please feel free to ask it. Also, if you feel uncomfortable for any reason and wish to skip a question, you may do so at any time without explanation. You can also ask for clarification of a question at any time. All of your personal information will be kept private and following this interview, a number on all documents that contain private information will replace your name.
- Additionally, if at any time you want to stop the interview, you are free to do so and your data will be destroyed and will not be used in the study.
- *Before proceeding I will have them read and sign the consent forms
- **Background**
  - Let's begin with a little background!
  - What's your major?
  - What year are you in school?
  - Where are you from?
  - Can you describe the community you grew up in?
    - Would you say that it was diverse? If so, how so?
      - Racially? Socioeconomically?
- What does a "normal" body look like to you?
  - What are some words you might use to describe a "normal" body?
  - What kinds of bodies would you say are "not normal"?
- **First thoughts about bodies**
  - Now let's talk about your first associations you have with your body.

- Can you remember the first time you consciously thought about body size, either of yourself or of someone else?
- What sorts of things/influences first made you think about your body?
  - Family?
  - Friends?
  - Media?
- Do you remember ever having a moment where you believed that certain bodies belonged to certain types of people?
  - For example, masculine bodies versus feminine bodies?
- Do you remember talking about body size in school?
  - Where did these conversations take place? What was the setting?
  - In class? With friends?

- **Body size perception**
  - At what age do you remember comparing your own body to others?
    - How did that make you feel?
  - How has this changed, as you've gotten older?
    - Would you say that you compare your body to others more or less?
    - What are things that cause you to compare yourself to others? Triggers?
  - Do your friends/family/partner contribute to how you feel about your body now? If so, how?

- **Defining body image**
  - What do you think of when you hear the term body image?
  - How would you define the term 'body image'?

*** do show cards here!
  - If you were talking to your friends, what words would you use to describe these bodies?

- o Ask them to rank the bodies in order from most desirable to least desirable.
- o Why are the ones most well ranked most desirable?
- o What are attributes that they have?
- o What don't they have?
- o Why are the ones least well ranked least desirable?
- o What do they have?
- o What don't they have?

- **Body projects**
  - o Say you have a friend who wants to lose weight. How might they go about losing weight?
  - o Why do you think they might want to lose weight?
  - o Methods of weight loss like dieting, exercising, diet pills and more extreme measures like anorexia and bulimia are what many sociologists call body projects.
  - o How would you feel if someone you knew dieted?
  - o How would you feel if someone you knew took diet pills?
  - o How would you feel if someone you know was anorexic?
- **Doctor relationships**
  - o Now let's talk about your relationship with doctors.
  - o Do you see a doctor regularly?
  - o Have they ever discussed weight with you?
  - o What did they say?
  - o Do you agree with them? How do you feel about the way this was handled?
  - o What kind of doctor was it?
- **Working out**
  - o What is your opinion of working out?
  - o Why do you believe that most people workout?
  - o Do you agree with this idea?

- o Why do you personally choose to workout?
- How would you describe your relationship to your body now?
  - o Did this change at all when you entered college?
  - o If you could change your body, what would you do?
- Are there any questions you have for me?
- Thank you for your time.