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Factors that Influence Body Image Representations of Black Muslim Women

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Abstract

Research on the body image perceptions of black women is limited. Although previous body image studies have explored the intersection between race and gender, the influence of religion has been neglected. Guided by a grounded theory framework, the focus of this investigation, conducted in Upstate New York, USA, was to examine the role of race and religion in the body image perceptions of 22 African-American Sunni Muslim women. Analysis of individual interviews revealed that, in contrast to using standard medical guidelines, participants' views about their bodies were largely based on positive images of an earlier body size/shape, social and family expectations and contexts, cultural norms and values, and spirituality and religious beliefs. Although the body image perceptions of black Muslim women were similar to those expressed in previous body image studies with black women, participants expressed the importance of highlighting the spiritual versus physical self by adhering to religious guidelines regarding proper dress and appearance. These findings suggest that religion, race, and gender are all important factors to be considered when conducting body image studies with black women.

Keywords

USA; Weight; Body Image; Blacks; Islam; Muslim Women

Introduction

In the last two decades, there has been growing interest in the study of body image in the United States (Pruzinsky & Cash, 2002). Despite the increase in scholarship on body image overall, limited work has focused on investigating body image perceptions of black women. Because perceptions of body image in mainstream society have been perceived as the norm, the majority of research including blacks has primarily compared the perspectives of black women with that of whites (Celio, Zabinski, & Wilfley, 2002). Studies show that while black women have a higher prevalence of overweight as compared to white women, they generally experience less body dissatisfaction, have a larger ideal body size, are more tolerant of a variety of body sizes and feel attractive at higher weights (Celio, et al., 2002; Allan, Mayo & Michel, 1993). Previous studies have suggested that heavier body image ideals and a greater cultural tolerance for larger body sizes among black women may serve as a protective factor in the development of certain types of eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa (Striegel-Moore, Dohm, Kraemer, Taylor, Daniels, Crawford, et al., 2003).

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Nevertheless, whereas early studies discussed black women's body image as a cultural asset, in the context of the growing concern over the rising prevalence of obesity, it has been suggested that body image norms in the black community may place black women at risk for overweight (Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998). For example, Bennett and Wolin (2006) report that obese black women were over three times as likely as their white counterparts to believe they were at "about the right weight" (p.40). These authors conclude that misperceptions in weight status among black women may suggest resistance to standard weight guidelines and recommendations regarding weight management. Similar to other researchers, Bennett and Wolin argue that to develop culturally appropriate strategies for obesity prevention and treatment in black women, a better understanding of the sociocultural influences on weight status perceptions is needed. However, while many studies have reported that black women prefer a larger ideal body size, few have examined the factors that influence how black women's perceptions of their bodies are formed (Sanchez-Johnson, Fitzgibbon, Martinovich, Stolley, Dyer & Van Horn, 2004; Becker, Yanek, Koffman, & Bronner, 1999; Powell & Kahn, 1995; Thompson, 1994).

The focus of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how black women conceptualize body image and how cultural interactions and norms support and refute these conceptualizations. Special consideration is given to examining how cultural identity, specifically racial and religious identities, intersects to shape black women's images of their bodies.

Although body image is clearly multidimensional, it has been broadly defined as a mental picture of the size, shape and form of the body and the feelings one has about these physical attributes (Slade, 1994). While most scholars agree that body image encompasses multiple physical and personal characteristics, in the context of Western societies, body image perceptions have been strongly associated with perceptions of body weight. In contrast, several scholars have provided a broader perspective on the study of the "body" and the importance of perceptions of the body to our understanding of experiences of health and illness (Willis, Miller & Wyn, 2001; Chernin, 1995)

Bordo (2003) indicates that "the body – what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body – is a medium of culture". Consequently, the body embodies societal beliefs and values regarding identity, gender roles and cultural acceptability and serves as a means of social control (Bordo, 2003). Because most of the medical and public health discourse surrounding obesity is framed in relation to risk for disease, social meanings of the body in this context have largely been ignored. Whereas the discourse on eating disorders framed black women's body image as deviating from mainstream norms of valuing thinness, subsequent discourses on obesity present black women as electing to deviate from medical classifications of a "healthy" weight. In contrast to this medicalized perspective of body image, which embraces a Cartesian view of the body (drawing separation between the body and mind), African cosmology makes no distinction between the body and the self ("the body is the self and the self is the body") (O'Neal, 1999). Thus, in the context of the black community, the body not only acts as a symbol of health or illness but represents a socially defined self that embodies diverse social and cultural meanings. Accordingly, the body image of black women likely reflects their own values and beliefs, as well as their historic view as "other" in mainstream society (Bordo, 2003).

The limited research that has focused on the social meaning of the body in black women has primarily emphasized race and gender, with growing evidence supporting the role of social class, childhood experiences, lifestage, and weight status in shaping black women's body perceptions. (Baptiste-Roberts, Gary, Bone, Hill, & Brancati, 2006; Thompson, 1994; Ofose, Lafreniere & Senn, 1998). One area that has not been examined in body image research with black women is religion. Religion appears to be especially salient for black women and has

been shown to play an important role in health and disease management (Holt & McClure, 2006; Chatters, 2000). Recent studies have reported a relationship between religion and weight, as well as religion and body image (Cline & Ferraro, 2006; Kim, 2007; Ferraro, 1998). These studies suggest that in contrast to the wider society, religious individuals may place less emphasis on the physical body and use their relationship with a higher power and/or the ability to meet moral/religious obligations to evaluate self-worth (Kim, 2006). Some evidence also supports that women participating in orthodox religions may experience less body dissatisfaction as compared to more secular women (Gluck, 2000). This may be especially true for women who embrace religions, such as Islam, that prescribe guidelines related to modest dress or covering the body. In their book entitled "Muslim women in American: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today", Haddad, Smith and Moore (2006) indicate that Muslim women who choose to dress "Islamically" commonly feel free of Western views of women as sex objects. It is believed that placing less emphasis on the public appearance of the physical body enables women to pursue interests such as school and employment without being under the "wandering gaze of men" (p.53). Nevertheless, much of the work focused on health and religion, as well as, religion, weight and body image, has been limited mainly to white and/or Christian populations.

Guided by a grounded theory framework, this study examined body image perceptions of 22 African-American Sunni Muslim women. The second largest religion in the world, Islam is the fastest growing religion in the U.S. (U.S. Department of State, 2002). While the majority of blacks participate in Christian religions, Islam has long been a viable religious alternative. In resistance to American oppression the first mass Islamic movements among blacks in America were established in the early 1900s as an effort to reclaim a lost Islamic heritage, (Turner, 1997). Although immigration patterns have significantly contributed to the rising number of Muslims in America, Islamic growth has been substantially influenced by conversion. In their recent study of U.S. mosques, Bagby, Perl & Froehle (2001) found that about 64% of converts were black. Even after the events of September 11th and the war in Iraq, some evidence suggests that rates of conversion have remained constant (Wilgoren, 2001). Because of the lack of data on religious affiliation in national surveys, it is difficult to determine the exact number of blacks that have embraced Islam. However, about 30% of the estimated six to seven million Muslims in the U.S. are reported to be black (Bagby, et al., 2001). The majority of Muslims in America, as well as blacks, who are Muslim, identify as Sunni. However, in contrast to their immigrant counterparts, black Muslims overall are less affluent, have lower educational attainment, and are more likely reside in urban areas (Bagby, et al., 2001; Kahera 2002, Ba-Yunus 1997).

Methods

This investigation was guided by a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). An inductive methodology, grounded theory facilitates the discovery of meanings, social processes, and social interactions as they emerge from the data for the purpose of theory generation. Because it emerges directly from data analysis, the resulting theory is empirically grounded in the experiences, perceptions and contexts of study participants. Grounded theory was selected to guide this investigation because the overall purpose was to develop a conceptual framework illustrating the social and cultural context that shape black Muslim women's food choice behaviors and health perceptions. The results reported in this paper are limited to perceptions of body image. Results from the overall investigation are presented elsewhere (Odoms, 1999).

Sampling and Recruitment

Twenty-two black Muslim women residing in a city of approximately 250,000 people located in upstate New York were recruited for participation in the study. Women were eligible for the study if they were at least 21 years of age and self identified as both black and Sunni Muslim. Maximum variation sampling, a type of purposeful sampling, was used to recruit participants with diverse experiences, backgrounds, education levels, ages, and household compositions (Patton, 1990). The study also employed theoretical sampling, which included recruiting participants to confirm/disconfirm themes and expand on hypotheses as they emerged (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Potential participants were informed of the study in a variety of ways. In two of the mosques, the Imam (religious leader) supported the research by inviting the author to attend mosque activities (e.g., prayers, special events), making announcements to attendees, providing contact information for women in the mosque, and facilitating contacts with other leaders in the Muslim community. Participants from the remaining two mosques were recruited through social networking and during participant observation.

Interviews

Individual in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the participants (Spradley, 1979). A follow-up interview was also conducted with all but 3 of the participants due to problems with scheduling (i.e., work, child care responsibilities). Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 3 hours. All interviews were conducted at participants' homes, restaurants, or mosques. The interview guide was developed using information obtained from the literature, results from previous studies, and prior experience working in the field. A draft of the guide was reviewed by other researchers working in nutrition and public health; pre-tested with Muslim leaders, black Muslim and non-Muslim women; and modified based on suggestions. The final version of the interview guide focused on body image, as well as food choices, past food experiences, cultural identity, social roles, religious involvement and religious beliefs. Although the guide provided a list of questions on specific areas, its semi-structured nature allowed participants flexibility to raise and elaborate on issues that were salient to them. All interviews were audiotaped and fieldnotes were taken during interviews to monitor interview quality, interview environment and methodological issues. For the purpose of confidentiality, each of the women was assigned a pseudonym. All study procedures were approved by the University Institutional Review Board at Cornell University. Demographic information including household income, age, and education was obtained from participants using a short close-ended questionnaire. Women received a gift certificate to a local supermarket or bookstore for their participation.

Data Analysis

Audio-tapes of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, formatted as text files, and input into QSR Nudist IV (Non-numerical Unstructured Data: Indexing, Searching, and Theorizing), a computer program for managing qualitative data (QSR, 1997). Consistent with grounded theory, an iterative process of data collection, analysis and theory development were conducted throughout the study to ensure that theoretical saturation or informational redundancy was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Initially, entire transcripts were read several times to obtain a clearer understanding of issues discussed within each interview. The text was then coded line by line to generate categories that reflected participants' descriptions of the factors that influence body image. This process consisted of identifying discrete ideas and concepts related to body image perceptions; breaking transcripts down into smaller conceptual text units (e.g., sentences and paragraphs), and labeling or coding text units according to their meaning. Combining categories that pertained to the same phenomena and/or developing sub-categories was used to develop the final list of categories. The category system was then reviewed and compared to the data many times to determine relationships between constructs. Lastly, case

studies were written to provide additional clarification of relationships between emergent constructs. Data quality was evaluated using the trustworthiness criteria described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), including prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, member checks progressive subjectivity, and confirmability/dependability audits. For example, member checks were conducted during follow-up interviews by asking participants to confirm and elaborate on issues, ideas, experiences, and practices that came up in the initial interview. Emergent constructs were also discussed with key informants during informal meetings, worship, and social gatherings.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Although the ages of participants ranged from 24–60 years, approximately 77% of the women in the sample were under age 45. The majority of the women (60%) were married at the time of the interview. Five of the women were divorced or separated. The remaining four women had never been married. Most of the women in the study (68%) had children under the age of 17. Of these, seven were single parents. In terms of education, all but one participant had completed high school. The majority (60%) had some college or trade school after high school. Twenty-three percent had a four-year college degree with one having post-baccalaureate studies. Eighty-one percent of the participants were employed. About half of those working were employed in positions associated with Islam or in the mosque. Of participants who reported they were “unemployed”, one worked inside the home, two received a disability income and one was retired. Although participants had a range of incomes, the majority could be classified as low income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001).

Emergent Themes

Data analysis revealed several themes related to participants’ body image perceptions. Women’s images of their bodies were commonly discussed in relation to racial and religious identities, family and social roles, and in contrast to broader societal norms. During the interviews, all of the participants expressed beliefs about their ideal body size/shape. In contrast to using standard medical guidelines, participants’ views about the appropriateness of their bodies were largely based on positive images of a previous body size/shape, social and family expectations and contexts, cultural norms and values, and spirituality and religious beliefs.

Images of my previous body: Desire to return to a previous body size/shape—

Participants’ beliefs about ideal body size/shape were heavily informed by positive images of their previous body size/shape. Several of the women indicated that over time age, increasing family/work responsibilities, and childbearing, caused them to put on “extra pounds”. When discussing their ideal body size/shape, women expressed interest in returning to their pre-marriage or pre-child body. Earlier ideal body size/shape was used as the guideline for measuring women’s satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their current body:

After I had this baby, my stomach was just out of shape. And I stand in the mirror and I look at it, it's just out of shape. It's not like I haven't done sit-ups., I've done sit-ups and whatever else you want to call it. But it's just out of shape, whereas it wasn't before. My stomach wasn't real tight, nothing like that, but it wasn't loose.

~Raniya

Because of their desire to return to a previous body size/shape, several of the women indicated that they were currently trying to lose or maintain their weight to achieve or be closer to their ideal. For some women, the earlier body size/shape that they considered ideal was still outside the range of what health professionals might classify as a “normal” weight:

I was always conscious of my weight when I was younger. I lost a great deal of weight and I got down to a sixteen...I think I was wearing about an eighteen but I had got down to a sixteen and I was proud of that....I want to get down to a nice size sixteen again if possible. And stay there.

~Zahraa

Using an earlier body weight to define appropriate body size/shape was also the case for participants that felt too thin. Yasirah, who had lost a significant amount of weight due to an illness, expressed her concern about being too “skinny”:

I won't go outside. I think to see somebody's ribs is the grossest thing. Even though nobody could see it (because of the covering). When I would take my clothes off. That was worse than being bigger because to me, being bigger I could still look good and feel good...Skinny, like 100, 115, I felt that. Now I'm 125 and I feel better.

Social and Family Expectations and Context—Social and family expectations and context played a major role in shaping participants' images of their bodies. Women discussed using social comparison and interactions with others to evaluate their appearance. Women's views of their bodies and (other women's bodies) were greatly influenced by their interpretation of cultural and family norms, interactions with other women and the opposite sex/male partners, and their beliefs about meeting social roles.

black women's body image beliefs: Although several of the participants expressed concern about their weight, the majority indicated that as compared to white women, black women tend to be more accepting of different body sizes. As portrayed in the media, white women were perceived to be more preoccupied with weight control and to place a higher value on thinness. In contrast to white women who are more concerned about weight, participants indicated that black women emphasize overall appearance, including the importance of maintaining their hair and clothes:

I find that when it comes to size, physical size, women of color, black women, specifically, they don't tend to care as much about their size whereas Caucasian women are more absorbed in their weight and counting calories and all that. So, as far as pressure, it may be pressure as far as how the hair is. How my nails look [Laughs]. What kind of dress I'm wearing. How it fits... if any kind of pressure as far as physically, just appearance

~Sabiya

Consistent with the emphasis on overall appearance, several participants stressed that women should select clothes that are appropriate for their figure. Many women mentioned that this is particularly important for women who are overweight:

The big women, they put the spandex on. And those ladies look in the mirror, they just see the front. If they ever took a good look at the back, all that cellulite, all that fat is showing. I went inside this plus store...They had a big old, about twenty size, twenty-eight miniskirt for a big woman...I said, "Now if that woman actually put that dress on, she ought to be ashamed."

~Haneefa

Women can't wear anything and everything. "Don't you know you a size 24?" Don't put no 14 pants on this thing. Don't do that. That looks terrible. Be attractive, feminine.

~Aniyah

Family norms related to body size/shape: Several participants reported that black women's body image perceptions of themselves and other black women may vary based on family context. Women believed that black women tend to judge their body size and shape in relationship to other members of their family. Sabiya provided her thoughts on why, in contrast to her extended family, her mother encouraged a smaller body size:

If your mother is big then that's acceptable, to be big. And usually, most of your mothers, your aunts and your cousins, everybody's got meat on the bones. I guess with me, my mother cooked and we had three meals a day. There was really no extra eating. Now if I lived down South with my aunts and where my cousins were at, I'd probably be eating all the time. And so I'd probably be a lot bigger.

Weight was reported to be particularly of concern when women were overweight in a family where most members had a smaller body size:

My family is always cracking little fatty jokes because I'm the biggest one in the family. But I'm not that big, but I'm the heaviest one in the family.

~Nadira

[In my family] everybody is thin. My mother is 105 and never gained any weight. My dad is 145, doesn't gain any weight. And my brothers are all 130. So they skipped a generation... I got the fat but none of the rest of my family. They were all very thin. So they eat all day long and that didn't help. They eat all day and don't gain. I eat all day long and I gain.

~Baheera

Body image perceptions of the opposite sex and male partners: Although, participants felt that black women generally were accepting of various body sizes, they frequently reported that men (including black Muslim men) put pressure on women to maintain a certain weight:

I think yes there's a tremendous amount of pressure on women from the men that are real close them – their father, their husbands, their brothers. Not for health reasons but strictly a cosmetic thing. "Ooh, you just look awful; you need to lose some weight."

~Ameera

Although men's weight preferences were discussed by several women, this issue appeared to be particularly salient for many single women because it served as a barrier to marriage:

I have heard my husband's friends say that they like [Mosque X] but they can't find a wife there. And I said to [my husband], "There's plenty of single sisters there." "But they're big sisters". That's what they said. They're too big for them. "And if they'd lose a little weight..." Maybe the brothers do view them as being big.

~Haneefa

A few participants personally felt that men had not approached them because of their weight:

I was [taking medication]. I was really bloated, real big. None of the brothers would look or even half speak. When I was bigger...I was 185 lbs, or something. ...They didn't speak, all the single brothers wouldn't speak...When I came back [thinner] brothers seem to be every other week. It would be somebody saying he was interested in me.

~ Yasirah

Nadira, had similar beliefs about the role of her weight in finding a mate. However, she felt that not having a mate may impact women's self-esteem and thus hamper their motivation to manage their weight:

You've got to have a will. I just got this conflict or self-esteem about myself. I don't care. I have to change that in order to eat right and do everything like I should.... I think it's because I'm by myself. I mean I don't have a mate. And that's probably, because when I always had a mate I was trying to look my best. Take care of my myself. I think maybe because I am single.

In contrast to single women, most married women reported that their husbands did not seem to be concerned about their weight:

My husband doesn't care [if I put on weight], either way. As long as I'm healthy and as long as I'm happy.

~Zainab

One participant, Hayia, who was recently married, indicated that she received an encouraging response from men when she gained weight. When she went from her normal 120 lbs to 150 lbs, Hayia found that men were generally positive and supportive:

[When I gained weight]. I received support from men. Because our men don't like skinny women. They don't. So that is a help. But it also can be detrimental. In another way, because our men don't like skinny women, we tend to get obese, get over fat.

Comments from Hayia and others suggest that although black men may prefer women not to be "skinny", women at the higher end of the weight spectrum felt that black Muslim men found them less desirable.

Beliefs about Weight and Social Roles: Some of the participants also reported that their perceptions of their body were related to their ability to meet role obligations and responsibilities. These women explained that it is important to model good behavior for children, as well as be healthy in order to care for them. Many women reported that caring for children was a role valued in both the black and Islamic communities. Zahraa, who recently lost weight, felt that her smaller size made it easier to keep up with her children:

We have to stay healthy... for yourself and the children. You have to keep yourself in good enough shape to keep up with them [Chuckles] or they'll run circles around you...I used to get tired and out of breath with being overweight and now that I've gotten some of it off, I don't get those short breaths anymore. "Come on Ma, let's go here or let's go there." I have the energy to do it now.

Nadira described that caring for yourself to care for children is important in Islam:

I need to lose weight. I'm too heavy for my height and I'm not taking care of myself. They say Allah is going to ask you what have you done with you? How was you taking care of your kids if you're not taking care of yourself first. If I'm not healthy and taking care of myself, how can I take care of my kids?

Spirituality and Religious Beliefs—Religious beliefs played a major role in women's views about the appearance of their bodies as well. Study participants discussed the importance of maintaining a body that was acceptable in Islam, particularly as it relates to appearance and dress. Although some consideration was given to the shape/size of the physical body, the women stressed the body should be a manifestation of religious and moral values. In contrast to emphasizing the physical self, many women indicated that by dressing modestly or covering their bodies, they were obeying the guidelines set by Allah. Although some participants felt

that religious rules related to dress and covering might cause women to neglect other aspects of their appearance, such as hair and weight, religious guidelines related to health in Islam were believed to be a motivator for women to care for their bodies and engage in healthy behaviors including healthy eating and physical activity.

Importance of the spiritual self vs. physical self: Participants indicated that as a Muslim, a person's primary focus should be on the spiritual rather than the physical body. Several stressed that people should be judged based on who they are instead of how much they weigh. Zahraa, indicated that a Muslim should not judge others based on outward appearances:

I'm one to believe that, what's in that person's heart and what's in their mind, that's what makes a person, not the weight, the weight doesn't make a person ...Allah didn't make us all the same size, he made us all different shapes and sizes and colors.

Consistent with the focus on the spiritual self, Sabiya felt that the focus in the Islamic community is not on body size but on appropriate Islamic dress and behavior:

Not necessarily the size. Although, in Islam, to be obese is a sin. To overeat is a sin. But covering, that's what the issue is. Cover your beauty and let only your husband see your beauty and, those in the immediate family. People can see [weight]...No one really concentrates.

Anyiah concurred:

[Not weight] As long as you're covered. The value that's put on the Muslim women is cover, protect yourself. If you protect yourself, you protect what belongs to your family. You protect yourself by cover.

Although women's thoughts regarding when and how the body should be "covered" varied, beliefs about covering were strongly associated with participants' perceptions of appropriate behavior for a "good" Muslim woman. Throughout the interviews, women frequently discussed ways in which covering (or not covering) changed their visibility and image as a Muslim woman:

...[W]ith Islam, you can see a Muslim. I mean, you line people up here, and you could probably tell... what they believe or whatever. Not necessarily what they believe, but what they are, Muslim. I don't know, Jewish, but like with Christians, you can line twenty people up there, you don't know.

Although covering the body made women's spiritual identity more visible, their physical appearance/identity became less visible. For example, Haneefa reported that making the physical body less visible gave her respect from both Muslims and non-Muslims and helped her evade sexual advances from men. In contrast, to the clothes she used to wear, her modest dress evoked a different response:

I went to this store on [street] before they closed it down. I went in there and I had my little dress on and they came with stuff. "Oooh, hi sister, hey, hey what's your name?" You know, that's the way they was addressing me. Two weeks later, I decided to take my Shahadah [testament of faith]. I go back in the same store with the same kid, "Oh, sister, can we help you? Can we open the door? Are these your kids?" It was whole different attitude. The first time I came in there, it was a sexual thing. They were looking at me. And when I came there with my [scarf] it was different.

Some participants expressed that making the physical body less visible could serve as a barrier for women maintaining it and cause them to pay less attention to their hair and weight:

I find that African-American sisters think less about their weight because they wear loose-fitting clothes, most of them wear loose fitting clothes so they don't dwell on their weight that much, but they should. Just not for appearances but for their health.

~Aida

Religious beliefs about the body: Many participants' beliefs about the relationship between the body and health were greatly influenced by Islam. Although participants felt that women should emphasize their spiritual self in appearance, many indicated that maintaining the health of the physical self was still important to Allah. Several women reported that Allah requires you to take care of the "body that he has given you":

In my religion, it does teach you that your body has rights over you. If it's tired, you know, you go to sleep, you know. If you need to eat and nourish yourself, you do that. You don't just let yourself go. You're not really supposed to do that.

~Sabiya

Likewise, women stated that Islam specifically instructs followers to not overfeed the body or "eat in moderation". Participants cited supporting doctrine that Muslims should not overeat to make room for prayer and because it can lead to overweight. Despite the emphasis on caring for the body and guidelines that discourage over-consumption in Islam, some participants still found it difficult to manage their weight. However a few reported that these beliefs motivated them to take better care of their body. For example, Zahraa described that prayer and her relationship with Allah helped her lose weight because it had a positive influence on her body image and self-esteem:

...After I started having the girls and going through trials and tribulations with their father, I just didn't care any more. You hurt me so, I'll eat...until I got low self-esteem, I had low self esteem back then. And where a lot of praying came in for me, praying to Allah and asking him for strength and motivation and to get myself back together. Give me my self-esteem back, because I was always shy, and ask him to grow me up in the mind. And it did. He's does it every day. So I thank him. I'm glad that, I went on and made that move and started getting it off again.

Discussion

Participants' narratives revealed that multiple identities intersect to influence the body image perceptions of African-American women. Consistent with other body image studies, despite concerns about managing their weight, participants felt that African-American women are less preoccupied with weight, more accepting of a wide range of body sizes, and place more emphasis on overall appearance (including hair and clothes) as compared to white women (Gipson, Reese, Vieweg, Anum, Pandurangi, Olbrisch, et al., 2005; Nichter, 2000; Wilfley, Schriber, Pike, Striegel-Moore, Wright, & Rodin, 1996). Nevertheless, while numerous studies have reported that black women are more tolerant of a larger body size, few have examined how these decisions are formed (Sanchez-Johnson et al., 2004; Becker et al., 1999; Powell & Khan, 1995). One factor that emerged as influential in the body image perceptions of black women was social and family context. Similarly, Parnell and colleagues (1996), reported that body image perceptions of black adolescents were more likely to be shaped by immediate family members such as mothers and grandmothers, whereas white adolescents were influenced more by the media and their peers. Dawson (1988) also found that in terms of weight, black women did not compare themselves with media images but with other black women. Consistent with these findings, since approximately 78% of black women are overweight, the majority may be more accepting of larger body sizes when other family members are used as a reference for comparison. However, women in the current study believed that black women

may experience greater body dissatisfaction if they are overweight in a family where most members are thin. Black women also reported developing their own personal systems for determining “ideal” body size versus using biomedical standards or mainstream norms (Gore, 1999; Allan et al., 1993). Instead of reporting a desire to fit into externally defined weight categories, several of the women indicated that they would like to return to an earlier body size or shape, especially their size prior to having children.

The current study shows that in addition to race, religion is also a factor in shaping black women’s perceptions of their bodies. Study findings suggest that women who are religious may be more tolerant of persons who are overweight because of beliefs that people should not be judged on their personal appearance but based on other attributes, such as spirituality. These findings also provide some support for previous work that suggest religious individuals may place a greater emphasis on religious behaviors (in this case covering) instead of on weight (Kim, 2006). Consistent with the findings of this study, previous work suggests that portraying the spiritual versus the physical self may be especially salient for women in orthodox religions (Graybill & Arthur, 1999). Consequently, they likely feel less pressure to meet societal norms related to appearance and weight. For example, feeling free of the need to meet broader societal norms regarding the sexuality of women, a woman in Haddad, Smith and Moore’s (2006) book was reported saying, “Thank goodness I don’t have to struggle into a size six dress anymore, or pay a fortune to have my hair done every week” (p.53).

As compared to weight, covering may be more salient for black Muslim women because it helps define and express their Islamic identity. Religious commitment and practice has been reported to be an important part of religious identity formation particularly for individuals who convert (Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999). In addition, black Muslims are not only religious “minorities” in the U.S., but commonly religious “minorities” in their communities and close social and family contexts. Consequently, negative responses caused women’s perceptions and beliefs about the need for covering to be constantly defended and renegotiated. As compared to weight, covering may be more salient for black Muslim women because it helps them define and express their Islamic identity. Religious commitment and practice have been reported to be important parts of religious identity formation, especially among individuals who convert (Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999). Read and Bartkowski (2000) reported a similar link between “veiling” and religious identity in their sample of American women of Middle Eastern descent. However, in addition to religion, covering may play an important role in the identity of African American women for other reasons. The image of Muslim women wearing *hijab* is in direct opposition to some historic representations of black women, particularly the highly sexualized Jezebel (hooks, 1992; Hill-Collins, 2000). Some black women in a study by Rubin, Fitts and Becker (2003) felt that negotiating images that overemphasize and stereotype black women’s mannerisms and behavior may be a more salient aspect of body image as compared to weight and aesthetics. Several of the black women in the current study perceived that by covering they were treated with more respect and viewed in a less sexual manner. Taylor (1999) cites that colonizing representations, such as the Jezebel, marginalize the images of black women and have been used by mainstream society to control and devalue their complexity. Contrary to common discourses connecting the veil to the oppression of Muslim women, for black Muslim women covering may liberate them from previous images and give them the power to construct and define their own identity (Archie, 2003).

Although more emphasis may have been placed on covering, doctrine in Islam regarding caring for the body was cited as a motivator for women to manage their weight. Still, many found weight management difficult to achieve. Similar to other low-income African-Americans, in spite of being motivated, some of the women in the current study may not have been able to act on these concerns because of barriers such as lack of resources and competing priorities

(Odoms, 1999). Nevertheless, these findings further support the idea that spiritual beliefs can serve as a motivator for women to engage in health behaviors (George, Ellison, & Larson, 2002). Likewise, findings suggest that for some black women self-esteem, self-efficacy, and a more positive body image gained from a relationship with God may help them meet their goals if they are already interested in losing weight. Self-esteem and self-efficacy have been cited as a potential mechanism explaining the relationship between religion and health (George, Ellison, & Larson, 2002). Studies show that black women commonly stress the importance of faith and prayer in managing health concerns (Holt & McClure, 2006). Kim (2006) has also reported that self-esteem mediates the relationship between religion and higher body satisfaction.

Previous research also supports the role of romantic relationships and marriage in women's body image perceptions (Markey, Markey & Birch, 2004; Friedman, Dixon, Brownell, Whisman, & Wilfley, 1999). Some women in the current study felt that although they are more accepting of various body sizes, men in their social and family context preferred women with smaller body sizes. These findings conflict with results from other studies that suggest black men are more accepting of, and even prefer, larger African-American women (Celio, et al., 2002). The findings in this study may differ for several reasons. First, previous studies primarily examine relative body image by comparing body size preferences of black men with those of white men. Because the women in this study only refer to black men, relative body image was not discussed. Still, these findings could imply that some black men may have an upper weight limit which they find desirable in partner selection. Second, because Islam emphasizes the importance of caring for the body, Muslim men may associate overweight with an inability to adhere to religious requirements. Nevertheless, in contrast to factors, such as making prayers and wearing *hijab*, studies with predominately immigrant Muslims reveal little evidence that caring for the body is a significant factor in evaluating religiosity for marriage (Al-Johar, 2005). Third, because it is important for Muslim women to dress modestly, other physical attributes, such as hair type, that have traditionally been noted in partner selection among African-American men in general, are diminished (Ashe, 1995; McAdoo, 1988). Consequently, in cases where symbols of religious behavior and identity are equal (such as wearing *hijab*), body size and weight may be additional criteria men use to evaluate attractiveness because of its visibility. This is further supported by responses from married women that indicate their spouses were less concerned about weight. Because we only interviewed women, it is not clear if the participants' perceptions of their spouses are accurate. However, in marriage, black Muslim men may focus less on weight because they are exposed to various aspects of their wife's "beauty". The ability to meet social and family roles was viewed as important in perceptions of body image as well. Family and child-rearing is emphasized in both black culture, as well as in Islam (Abdul-Rauf, 1995; Mosley-Howard & Evans, 2000). Similar to black women overall, the women in the study were managing multiple roles including work, mosque participation, and family care. Ability to meet role obligations may have been more significant in this sample because several of the women had limited resources and/or were managing these roles as single parents.

Limitations

Although the study yields important insights about the contribution of race and religion to body image, this investigation has several limitations. First, this study was done before the terrorist attack on September 11th 2001 and Iraq conflict. Other studies suggest that these events may impact women's views about covering, specifically deterring women from wearing *hijab* out of fear of being a target of anti-Islamic sentiments or encouraging women to wear *hijab* to represent a positive Islamic Identity (Hallak & Quina, 2004). Nevertheless, since wearing *hijab* is a very personal decision, it is likely that these events might have expanded discussions about black Muslim women's body image but not eliminated women's existing perceptions

and beliefs. Second, this study only consisted of a small sample of 22 African-American Muslim women residing in Upstate New York. Although many findings are similar to other studies of black, black Muslim and Muslim women, more work should be done to understand the extent to which these themes apply in other contexts and in a larger sample. Third, the majority of this sample can be classified as low-income. Socioeconomic status has been shown to play a role in body image perceptions of black women, with lower income women being more accepting of larger body sizes (Allan et al., 1993). As a result, different themes may be relevant in a sample of all middle income African-American Muslim women. Lastly, the investigator conducting the interviews was African-American but not Muslim. This may have influenced how the information was shared and interpreted. However, prolonged engagement in the research site was used to build trust and rapport and interview guides were reviewed by leaders and women in the black Muslim community to enhance the relevance of the interview questions.

Conclusion

Although there is growing interest in body image research in women of color, studies that examine an association between body image and religious beliefs have been limited. Recent studies exploring the relationship between religion, body satisfaction and weight; studies linking spirituality and preventative health practices in African Americans; and the increasing number of weight management interventions being conducted in African-American faith-based institutions support the need for more work in this area. Findings from this study suggest that how black women view themselves is complex and rooted in social, historical, cultural and religious contexts. Women's body image not only consisted of views on weight and appearance but also functional capabilities and social roles, health, and religious obligations. Kumanyika and colleagues. (1993) proposed that more tolerant attitudes and less social pressure regarding weight among African Americans may contribute to the racial differences observed in body image perceptions. However, before understanding the relationship between body image and weight management, it is important that we first gain a deeper appreciation of the ways African-American women conceptualize body image and the factors that influence it. Through the experiences of 22 African-American Muslim women, this study supports previous findings that body image is not universal and may vary among different cultural, socioeconomic and cultural groups.

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