

# African-American males prefer a larger female body silhouette than do whites

ELLEN F. ROSEN, ADOLPH BROWN, and JENNIFER BRADEN  
*College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia*

and

HERMAN W. DORSETT, DAWNA N. FRANKLIN, RONALD A. GARLINGTON,  
VALERIE E. KENT, TONYA T. LEWIS, and LINDA C. PETTY  
*Hampton University, Hampton, Virginia*

African-American and white college males volunteered to participate in a study of preferences for a side-view silhouette of a female figure. The figures were on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 8, with 1 being a very thin figure and 8 being an obese figure. The subjects indicated their thinnest and largest acceptable and preferred female body shape for women in several roles: date, sexual partner, wife, mother, sister, teacher, employer, grandmother, girlfriend, and female friend. African-American males were predicted to select larger body shapes than were whites because of cultural differences in standards of attractiveness. In general, the results confirmed these hypotheses: African-American males always chose a larger ideal female silhouette and were not as tolerant as whites of very thin figures. These results were suggested to be a potential variable accounting for racial differences in females' body dissatisfaction.

Rosen et al. (1991) found significant differences in African-American and white college-age females in some self-perception variables. The whites reported greater body dissatisfaction than did African-American females even though they weighed less. In a study in Zimbabwe, similar results were found (Hooper & Garner, 1986). Such different self-perceptions might be attributable to socioeconomic differences, as has been suggested for anorexia nervosa (Garner, Garfinkel, & Olmstead, 1983; Silber, 1986). In fact, Silber identified only two African-American cases of anorexia nervosa in 12 years, which constituted only 1.4% of the cases reported. He "added" five Hispanic cases to bring the number of "minority" anorexics to seven cases, thus increasing the percentage to 5%. Hispanic and African-American culture are distinct and diverse, and so this is not a good addition. Furthermore, since African-Americans constitute about 17% of the population in the United States, 1.4% is exceedingly low.

A possible explanation is that the so-called "Twiggy" look is not favored by African-American males. Realistically, for college-age females, appearance may play an important role in attracting dates. Thus, appealing to the cultural norms of the potential date population is probably an important factor in determining desired appearance. In most cultures, plump women are more valued than thin ones (Hyde, 1990), although our society seems

to place more value on thinness. For example, in Zimbabwe, success and fatness are thought to be related (Hooper & Garner, 1986).

Men tend to put more emphasis on attractiveness in determining whom to date. Berscheid, Dion, Walster, and Walster (1971) showed that for women, there was a much stronger relationship between how men viewed them in terms of attractiveness and the frequency with which they were selected as dates. On the other hand, they found that women do not seem to be as much influenced by physical attractiveness with respect to their selection of dates. Thus, although feminists would like to believe that women work on their physical appearance solely for the enhancement of self-esteem, the research suggests a more pragmatic rationale, at least for heterosexual women.

Thus, it was hypothesized that African-American males, being influenced by a more mainstream culture (one more in tune with cultures in the rest of the world), would show preferences for body silhouettes of more plump women than would white males. To determine if this was a general phenomenon or only limited to potential sexual relationships, several categories of women were evaluated. Using a modification of the technique of Bell, Kirkpatrick, and Binn (1986), side views of diverse female body sizes were shown to a sample of white male students from a predominantly white institution and to a sample of African-American male students from a predominantly African-American institution. In roles having to do with romance, African-American males were expected to prefer a larger image, whereas in roles not having to do with romance, no differences were expected.

Correspondence should be addressed to E. F. Rosen, Department of Psychology, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA 23187-8795.

## METHOD

### Subjects

The white sample ( $N = 80$ ) came from the College of William and Mary subject pool. These men received research participation credit for their involvement in this study. Data from the very small number of minority students in this group were excluded. The white subjects' average age was 19.0 years. Their weights ranged from under 54.54 kg to over 100.00 kg, with a mean weight of about 77.3 kg. Their heights ranged from 1.60 m to over 1.96 m, with a mean height of about 1.83 m. Ninety percent reported coming from a home with both mother and father present, and 60% reported a total yearly family income of over \$50,000.

The sample of African-American subjects ( $N = 91$ ) was invited to participate by students at Hampton University enrolled in a computer course for social science majors taught by the last author. No other selection criteria were used to determine who would be a subject in the study. The African-American subjects' average age was 19.9 years. Their weights ranged from 55 kg to over 100 kg, with a mean weight of about 77.3 kg. Their heights ranged from under 1.60 m to over 1.96 m, with a mean height of about 1.73 m. Forty-seven percent reported coming from a home with both mother and father present, and 38% reported a total yearly family income of over \$50,000.

### Procedure

The subjects were asked to fill out a questionnaire, constructed by the authors, which provided them with a body-profile scale that was a modification of the scale used by Bell et al. (1986). The subjects were asked to use the scale to answer questions about their thinnest acceptable, ideal, and largest acceptable figure for a date, girlfriend, sexual partner, wife, mother, teacher, employer, grandmother, sister, and friend.

The subjects responded by making a mark on the Likert-type 8-point scale that appeared under each item. The body-profile scale was on a separate sheet of paper, and the subjects referred to that as they answered the questions. Side profiles were used, since it was felt that these might be more representative of racial differences. The profiles were generated on a computer system from one original figure to insure that there were no variations other than size.

## RESULTS

The mean choices made are shown in Figure 1. Each role was analyzed in a race  $\times$  criterion (thinnest, largest, ideal) covariate analysis of variance (ANCOVA) with repeated measures on the second variable using reported family income as a covariate. Family income was reported as a scale of 1 to 5, in which 1 represented under \$15,000 and 5 over \$50,000. These analyses are summarized in Table 1. In the multifactor ANCOVAs, race was a significant main effect except for the roles of employer and grandmother. The main effect of criterion and the interaction of race and criterion were significant for all roles. Generally, the  $F$ s were large enough so that  $p < .01$ .

Family income only had a significant effect on the roles of female friend [main effect,  $F(1,154) = 6.24, p < .05$ ], employer [main effect,  $F(1,159) = 3.83, p < .05$ ], and teacher [income  $\times$  criterion interaction,  $F(2,318)$ ]. The males' preferences for body silhouettes for the other roles were not affected by economic status.

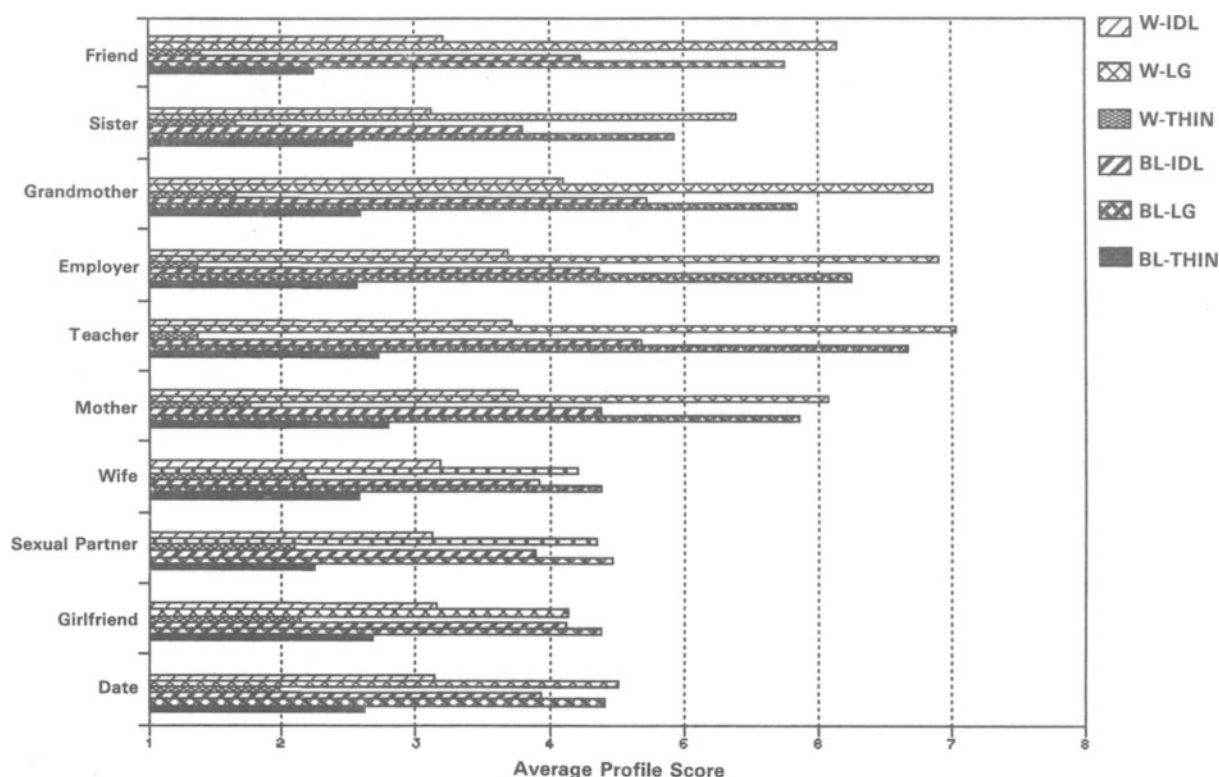


Figure 1. Average profile ratings selected by white (W) and African-American (BL) college men as ideal (IDL), largest acceptable (LG), and thinnest acceptable (THIN) for the diverse roles.

Table 1  
Summary of *F*s From ANCOVAs With Income as Covariate

Role	Race	Criterion	Race × Criterion
Female friend	10.11† (1,154)‡	29.64† (2,308)	10.81† (2,308)
Grandmother	< 1 (1,160)	27.11† (2,320)	20.27† (2,320)
Sister	4.35* (1,156)	16.54† (2,312)	9.65† (2,312)
Employer	3.25 (1,159)	25.66† (2,318)	13.27† (2,318)
Teacher	12.69† (1,159)	21.29† (2,318)	10.22† (2,318)
Mother	8.18† (1,160)	19.70† (2,320)	8.67† (2,320)
Wife	16.56† (1,159)	11.82† (2,318)	4.84† (2,318)
Sexual partner	12.61† (1,158)	13.70† (2,316)	8.70† (2,316)
Girlfriend	34.34† (1,161)	20.76† (2,322)	9.06† (2,322)

\* $p < .05$ . † $p < .01$ . ‡The numbers in parentheses after each *F* value are *df* for numerator and *df* for denominator, respectively.

## DISCUSSION

The hypothesis that African-American and white males differ in their preferred (ideal) female body silhouette was confirmed. The ideal silhouette selected by the African-American males was always larger than that selected by the white males for all roles. Additionally, African-American males generally indicated larger minimally acceptable figures than did white males. There were no racial differences in the largest acceptable silhouette except that the white men had heavier upper limits for employers and grandmothers than did African-American men.

Since the ANOVAs were performed using family income as a covariate, and race was still a significant factor, clearly economic status is not responsible for this effect. This suggests that financial status, one component of socioeconomic status, is not an important determinant of men's preferences for body shape. This is not in line with what others have proposed about eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. Many other researchers have suggested that as socioeconomic status increases, so will the frequency of eating disorders (Garner et al., 1986).

Thus, the hypothesis of this study was confirmed. There is a difference in body-size preference between African-American and white college males. African-American men prefer larger female body profiles than do white males. Since this difference is in the same direction as that in the earlier study (Rosen, 1991) in which racial body dissatisfaction differences among women were found, differences in male preference could be responsible for the women's dissatisfaction. Thus, the white males may be operating on the "Twiggy" principle, whereas the African-American males are not, with the result that African-American women are not as dissatisfied with their body shape as are white women who may actually be smaller. The male difference in preference could reflect an overall ethnic/cultural view. African-American males at Hampton University make a distinction between "fat" and "phat." "Fat"

is unattractive excess weight, but "phat" is sexy and attractive. It remains to be seen if females are aware of this difference and if women do, in fact, care.

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