WEIGHT MATTERS: AFRICAN AMERICAN SORORITY WOMEN SPEAK UP ABOUT BODY IMAGE

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Seidman's (1998) Three-Interview Series was conducted with eight African American sorority women to explore history, details, and meaning of their body image. These themes were identified: Weight Trumps Everything Else, Family Criticism and Comparison, How I Look in Clothes, Intra-cultural Understanding of Black Women's Bodies, Health Awareness, Media Responsibility, and Age. Participants made connections between sorority stereotypes and body image. Participants questioned motivation (self versus society) behind their feelings and behaviors. Participants wanted to help others achieve body image acceptance. Findings challenge the notion that African American women are "culturally protected" from body image dissatisfaction. Implications for practice are discussed.

A heightened interest in eating disorders has increased conceptual and empirical knowledge about the social construction of body image (Patel & Gray, 2001). Body image has been described as "the way we see our size, shape, and proportions, as well as how we feel about our bodies" (Hersh, 2001, p. 97) and has become a major psychological and physical problem for American women—including a recent increase in problems for women of color (Salem & Elovson, 1993). Studying body image is important because its pervasiveness in the American culture leads to significant distress including preoccupation with appearance and weight which correlates with eating disorders, low self-esteem, anxiety, vulnerability, and depression (Falconer & Neville, 2000; Hoyt & Kogan, 2001).

Mainstream American culture is dominated by an ideal body image. Studies purport the ideal woman is young, tall, thin, toned, has a fair complexion, blue eyes, straight hair, and few curves (Demarest & Allen, 2000; Hirschmann & Munter, 1995; Rabak Wagener, Eickhoff-Shemek & Kelly-Vance, 1998;). According to Thompson (1994) "Girls who don't fit the standard mold, look like tomboys, have dark skin, nappy hair, and are chubby or just plain big" (p. 27). While much of the body image research recognizes that a "standard of beauty" has been socially constructed, there is a lack of acknowledgement that this standard promotes Whiteness as the uniform picture of beauty.

The White image of perfection has long been endorsed by the media, even in advertisements in Essence magazine which,

> … play upon and perpetuate consumers' feelings of inadequacy and insecurity over the racial characteristics of their body by insisting that in order to be beautiful, hair must be straightened and eyes lightened; and employing models with fair skin, Anglo-Saxon features, and hair that moves (Bordo, 2003, p. 263).

Throughout history, media representations have been replete with stereotypical images of African American women like the "Jezebel" and "Mammy." Jezebels are portrayed as promiscuous and closely linked to White standards of beauty, often shown with light skin and straight hair (Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, 2004). The matriarchal Mammy image is framed as unattractive, asexual, and representing the ultimate stereotype of the contented slave (Jones, 2000). The dominant ideologies expressed by these stereotypes equate African American women with sexuality and labor. The psychological impact of experiencing such systematic devaluation can

produce struggles with self-esteem in African American women. Acknowledging racist and sexist constructions of African American women's bodies is essential for understanding their experience of body image.

Cultural messages promoting White standards of beauty have targeted African American women throughout history. As early as the 1950s, African American women used skin-bleaching cream to lighten their skin (Brumberg, 1997). Over time, they have used chemical straighteners or hot irons on their hair because White standards of beauty defined their natural hair as "bad." Currently, the overarching compliance of women of color with White standards of beauty is illustrated by many women of color's choice to undergo cosmetic surgery in order to change "ethnic features" into more "western looking" appearances (Kaw, 1993). Wolf (2002) references a cosmetic surgery clinic's service offering to change "a fat and rounded Afro-Caribbean nose that needs correction" (p. 264). According to Barrow (2005), plastic surgery among African Americans increased 24% from 2000 to 2004. Steinem (1992) comments, "Hierarchies of skin color and racial features are sad testimonies to racism's power to undermine self-esteem, and thus to maintain a racial status quo" (p. 218).

While emerging research shows African American's ideal standard of beauty may differ from the prevailing White standard, the pursuit of the ideal image is normative for most women (Polivy & Herman, 1987; Rodin, Silberstein & Striegel-Moore, 1985). Various feminist theorists argue that cultural messages about beauty were created and sustained by a patriarchal structure that "intends to keep women in their place" (Maine, 2000, p. x). However, such feminist approaches have limitations. The early feminist movement assumed that White women's experiences were universal and often failed to validate that African American women are doubly oppressed by virtue of race and gender, which results in unique experiences for them (Hill Collins, 1991; Yancy, 2000).

The literature on African American women's body image is contradictory and inconclusive with some studies conveying that African American women are satisfied with their bodies (Altabe, 1998; Gore, 1999; Hawkins, 2005; Henriques, Calhoun, & Cann, 1996; Malloy & Herzberger, 1998; Nichter, 2000; Powell & Kahn, 1995; Rhea, 1999; Smith, Burlew & Lundgren, 1991). In these studies African American women reported: 1) satisfaction with their weight, facial and overall appearance, 2) less preoccupation with thinness, 3) choosing a significantly larger ideal body size, and 4) less social pressure to be thin. Overall, their desired body image corresponded with a curvaceous look rather than a particular weight (Hawkins).

This same research makes reference to "cultural protection factors" that prevent the development of body image dissatisfaction by providing a broader definition of the ideal, acceptance of a larger body size, less emphasis on physical appearance, family support, accurate perceptions of African American men's preference, a strong racial identity, and a masculine gender role orientation (Demarest & Allen, 2000; LeGrange, Telch & Tibbs, 1998; Patel & Gray, 2001; Powell & Kahn, 1995; Pumariega et al.,1994). However, notions of such cultural protection have been criticized due to pervasiveness of the media. According to Bordo (2003), "No body can escape either the imprint of culture or its gendered meanings" (p. 212).

Some studies find African American women are just as likely as White women to have body image concerns about weight, shape, and eating (Brooks, 2000; Dacosta & Wilson, 1996; Demarest & Allen, 2000; LeGrange et al., 1998; Nova Online, 2002; Patel & Gray, 2001; Pumariega et al,. 1994; Thompson, 1994). In

these studies, when compared to White women, African American women were found: 1) to possess comparable Eating Disorder Inventory scores, 2) to desire to be thinner than they were, 3) to have no greater satisfaction with their bodies, 4) to experience pressure to be thin from their families, and 5) to have a high frequency of laxative abuse.

Research that asserts African American women's vulnerability to experience body image dissatisfaction implicates acculturation (identification with White standards of beauty) (Kenny & Runyon, 1998; Osvold & Sodowsky, 1993; Thompson, 1994). Dittrich (1996) explained, "The more a person is pressured to emulate the mainstream image, the more the desire to be thin is adopted, and with it an increased risk for the development of body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders" (¶4). The National Eating Disorders Association (2002) concluded that acculturation is influential, but that it is complex and not a stable indication of immunity to developing body image problems.

Inconsistencies in the literature are attributable to stereotypic profiles of those affected by body image concerns, the conceptualization of body image as a uni-dimensional construct (looking only at weight), the overgeneralization of Euro-American norms, and reliance on studies conducted in settings that may have limited exposure to women of color (Harris, 1995; Thompson, 1994). The empirical understanding of body image is limited to data based almost exclusively on White, middle class, heterosexual college students or clinical samples of White women (Altabe, 1998; Rhea, 1999).

Among college women, sororities are identified as high-risk groups for experiencing body image concerns because their high socioeconomic status forces them to meet social expectations (Alexander, 1998; Crandall, 1998; Hoerr, Bokram, Lugo, Bivins & Keast, 2002; Mecham, Pole & Bonifazi, 2001; Meilman, von Hippel & Gaylor 1991; Rolnik, Engeln-Maddox, & Miller, 2010; Schulken, 1997; Schwitzer, Rodriguez, Thomas & Salimi, 2001). When compared to other college students, sorority women showed 1) a greater fear of becoming fat, 2) more dissatisfied with their bodies 3) increased experiences with diet pills, 4) reduced high-fat foods from their diet more often, 5) allowed weight concerns to interfere with relationships at a higher rate, 6) possessed more harsh judgments of their bodies, 7) engaged in a very high rate of binge eating, 8) were more likely to purge, 9) reported greater bulimic symptomology than, and 10) possessed a higher drive for thinness. Despite these findings, African American sorority women (AASW) largely have been ignored in such studies (see Table 1).

Table 1

Sorority Studies and Racial Demographics of Participants

Author	Date	# of Participants	% of White Participants
Reeves and Johnson	1992	372 sorority women	96 %
Kashubeck et al.	1997	478 sorority women	95.8%
Schulken et al.	1997	627 sorority women	91%
Mecham et al.	2001	230 sorority women	100%
Sapia	2001	80 sorority women	92.5%
Hoerr et al.	2002	1620 students, 10.9% sorority women	81%
Allison and Park	2003	205 sorority women	94%

Newly emerging empirical research that has included African American fraternities and sororities commonly has focused on five areas: hazing/pledging, civil rights/civic participation, cultural aesthetics (stepping), media representations and race/ gender identity (Hughey, 2012). The research on sororities has experienced a type of silo syndrome that segregates studies of NPC and NPHC groups. Most sorority studies have not acknowledged the homogeneity of the population in the research design nor as a limitation of the study. Several did not acknowledge the racial composition of the participants, thereby inferring that White sorority women represent all sorority women (Alexander, 1998; Crandall, 1998; Lea, 2004). Only one study explored body image among AASW (Gore, 1999). In an effort to explore weight control behavior among middle class African American women, the author drew most of her sample from the four historically African American sororities. However, this was not a clear part of the research design.

These studies are not generalizable to AASW because of the cultural distinctions between historically White and African American sororities. African American sororities were founded to provide community development and engagement, racial uplift, and to address inequality (Berkowitz & Padavic, 1999; Lee-Olukoya, 2010). The lifetime commitment to African American sororities is another distinguishing factor with many members active long after graduation making career networking a salient part of membership (Giddings, 1998). Delta Sigma Theta sorority alone has over 125,000 members and 730 chapters worldwide (Giddings). More recent statistics indicate that Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority maintains a sisterhood of over 260,000 members (House Stewart, 2013). Yet, these women are underrepresented in sorority-related body image research.

Methodology

This study addresses the following gaps in body image literature: 1) the marginalization of AASW as research participants and 2) the lack of empirically-backed conclusions and implications regarding African American women's body image satisfaction. The intent is to give voice to AASW, by answering the question: "How do AASW experience and make meaning of body image?" "Giving voice" derives from feminist movements and conveys that marginalized people should have a chance to speak about their lives (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). A qualitative approach is used because little information is actually known about the cultural context of African American women's body image (Falconer & Neville, 2000).

Seidman's (1998) Three-Interview Series was used to conduct structured, 90-minute phenomenological interviews with eight AASW between the ages of 20-30. The three interviews allowed each participant to place body image in the context of her life by: 1) addressing the history of her body image, 2) describing details of her current body image, and 3) reflecting on the meaning she has assigned to her body image experience. Some interviews were conducted in three separate meetings over a three week timeframe while others were conducted back-to-back for a total of 24 interviews.

Eight participants were recruited through liaisons. Pseudonyms were assigned to ensure confidentiality. A lay summary form explained the intent of the study and informed participants about their rights. There are several important demographic identifiers in this study: the participant's sorority membership, their length of participation, and educational attainment. Eight women participated in the interviews: four members from sorority Y, two members from sorority W, and one member each from sorority X and Z. Seven participants completed

a master's degree. Four of these seven master's degree holders were working on their doctorate degree. Educational attainment is an important identifier because of it influences acculturation. Half of the participants joined their sorority during their undergraduate experience and half became members through a graduate chapter (for women who have earned a degree and did not apply for membership in an active chapter on campus). Eighty percent were actively participating in their sororities. Six years was the average length of sorority participation, with eleven years the longest and two and half years the shortest.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Psydonym	Sorority	Length of Participation	Degree Status
Peggy	Sorority W	2.5 years	Master's, coursework doctoral
Mary	Sorority Z	5 years	Bachelor's
Kathy	Sorority Y	3 years	Master's
Patty	Sorority X	3 years	Master's, ABD doctoral
Sandy	Sorority W	9 years	Master's, ABD doctoral
Linda	Sorority Y	9 years	Master's, applying doctoral
Maureen	Sorority Y	11 years	Master's, ABD doctoral
Cathy	Sorority Y	5 years	Master's

It is important to remember that generalizing the findings is not a major purpose of qualitative research. Rather, phenomenology is concerned with uncovering the essence of lived experience. Limitations of this study include: 1) selection bias and 2) the fact that results could differ if participants had joined their sorority at an HBCU.

Results

I analyzed the data for themes by examining repetition of key words in the transcripts, determining similarities across experiences, and exploring the context of key words (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Seven themes were identified as being salient to the participant's experience of body image.

Weight Trumps Everything Else

Weight appeared to be more important in determining attractiveness than other parts of a person's identity (facial beauty, education, personality). The majority of participants defined body image as both "how you feel about yourself on the inside and how you look on the outside." Weight was the defining feature for "how you look on the outside." Participants were asked to describe their body and most expressed unfavorable feelings about their size and shape. Sandy described her body as "Not good. There's still an athletic body underneath a couple layers of fat that seem to keep growing. I would definitely say large—and unfamiliar, just not used to being this size or looking like this." Linda said, "I have hips and a butt (pear-shape). I have a big ol' chest. I feel like I don't fit."

Three participants expressed dissatisfaction with their bodies in the past. For example, Mary spoke of her unhappiness:

> I didn't like myself. I was not happy with my size. I was always trying to find ways to get smaller, but I couldn't understand. The more and more I worked out, the thicker I became. I hated going to the store. I didn't like who I was. I didn't like seeing myself as a beautiful person. I thought if you have long, slender legs and a nice, small waist, then maybe you would be considered a pretty person. I saw other people who looked like me; and I thought they were beautiful, but I didn't think I had what they had.

When she was younger, Peggy used diet pills because she felt fat. She said, "I did diet pills in my teenage years and snuck and did it because I was not happy with myself. When Metabolife came out, that's when I bought some. I don't know how old I was, maybe 15 or 16." Two participants stated that they were not concerned with their body image in the past, but were currently conscientious about their body image because of health issues in their family, the media, and changes in their bodies.

Six participants presently were not satisfied with their bodies and cited "being overweight" as the primary reason for their dissatisfaction and referenced weight as what they would change about their bodies. Mary said she "thinks constantly about trying to lose weight." Linda expressed her thoughts on losing weight by stating, "If I can just get to that healthy size, where I feel comfortable, I'd be happy." Kathy commented, "It's just like if you are skinny, everybody in the world would be happy."

Participants specified where body parts would be smaller and more toned. The mid-section (butt and stomach) were mentioned most often; other body parts included arms, hair, thighs, hips, legs, and height. Of the two participants who were satisfied, one said that she could still "improve."

Participants also described the societal standard of beauty and the "perfect" woman as having a thin body. For example, five participants described the perfect woman as being a certain size (between sizes 5-12), having a small waist, muscular/toned arms stomach, and displaying good skin, and being tall. Only a few participants described the perfect woman with internal qualities (confidence), whereas most connected perfection to external qualities (smaller size). Sandy described the societal standard of beauty as "tall, thin, young, no wrinkles, skinny legs, small waist, larger breasts, more White feature-wise." Other participants noted additional specific characteristics including long hair, flawless skin, and healthy teeth. Many participants summed up the societal standard of beauty by referring to people in the media (magazine, television and movies) as representations. Peggy explained, "Magazine covers or thin White girls (represent the societal standard of beauty)." When asked what the societal standard of beauty was, Cathy replied, "whoever the latest person is on television."

Participants had mixed responses to the question "Do you hold yourself to society's physical standards for women?"Two participants expressed their standards did not align with societal standards as there was one way to define beauty. Two participants said their standards did align; and two others said they resist and comply with societal standards. The last two participants explained they neither complied nor resisted.

Several participants' comments suggested that weight trumps everything else. When talking about her particular body image developed, Sandy spoke of her modeling experience where she heard she had a very beautiful face, but needed to change her body. Kathy shared similar examples and went on to share how skin color plays a role in beauty and weight. First, she shared, "I have friends that are pretty but

heavy-set, and the first thing somebody says is they are too big. They look at their weight first as opposed to their face or personality." While speaking about White standards of beauty, she said, "Jokes are made about a really dark skin color, unless the dark skin person has a good figure." Peggy reflected, "When the weight was off, more people starting saying how attractive I am. It almost makes you look at yourself like, was I ugly? I guess I do equate weight with not being attractive." Lastly, Kathy shared:

> My Godfather hadn't seen me in a couple of years, and said, "Oh you got fat." Meanwhile I received a bachelor's and master's, got a job and won sorority awards. I asked my father to say something to him a couple years later, but he said I don't think so. So, if you don't have a good body image, you can really go into depression. There is more emphasis on weight than stuff I think is more important, like education, trying to be financially stable, trying to be healthy.

Family Criticism and Comparison

Participants acknowledged family influence on their body image when discussing the receipt of critical feedback about their bodies and comparison to other family members. Family criticism often focused on weight. Sandy said her mom and dad teased her and called her father's comments, "brutal, mean, and hurtful." Once her mother said, "Sandy, I just never thought you'd look like this." She also shared the following example of her father's criticism:

> When we were younger, we would come running down the stairs; and he's like, you sound like a herd of cattle or that we had big legs like horses. Recently, my father was picking on my weight. He said, 'I'm not picking on your weight. If I was, I would've told you that they should have made you buy two seats on the airplane because you're so big.' I kind of laughed it off, but it was pretty hurtful.

In several instances, when participants shared anecdotes regarding family criticism, they also shared that the criticism did not have a negative impact. For instance, Patty noted that her "feelings don't get hurt, by her mother's bluntness about her body and it's made her stronger."

Participants also compared their bodies to other family members. Mary explained her family comparisons:

> Growing up in my household, I've had big-boned people, and my mom, who's very petite, had four children. You know, I've wondered why I was such the big one, why I was so big. I was bigger than the majority of my brothers and sisters and cousins.

Sandy spoke of the inevitable comparison with her twin sister and explained that other people compared them more than she did. She said, "People will go home to family reunions and it's like, Susie's the skinny one and Sandy's the fat one." Peggy shared:

> I look at my family, not my immediate family, but like Great Aunts and Uncles and Grandparents. Overweight and obesity is in the family. I look at family members and say, "Is this going to be me in ten years?" I just want to make sure I stay slim and trim. Obesity does run in my family. My family plays a big role. My sister is like a size zero, and my mom is voluptuous. I try to be like my sister, but I don't want to be like my Great Aunt, who is really heavy.

One participant related her body image to family experiences of growing up poor and childhood sexual and physical abuse. When

asked about how she came to have her particular body image, Linda said:

> I wasn't a wealthy kid, so I didn't have the clothes everybody else had. So, equate that with being big, and then you couldn't get your hair combed like everybody else. Just the fact of how I grew up and maybe being poor contributed to that 'cause I didn't have what everybody else had. And some abuse went on in my childhood too, early childhood sexual and physical; so that developed how I felt about myself too.

How I Look In Clothes

Many participants related body image to their appearance in clothes. For instance, Cathy spoke about how deciding what to wear and shopping for clothes connected to her body image: "I think about my body image every day, especially when I'm finding something to wear, which is like the most stressful part of my day-finding something to wear to work. Or when I'm doing my hair. Or when I go shopping, trying on clothes or how they fit." Sandy included how she looked in clothes as a part of her definition of body image. Peggy explained that her body image has been affected by her ability to fit into clothes that she couldn't fit into before:

> I picked up weight. I could tell when I tried on my pants and I couldn't get them up. Shirts were too tight. I was like, "Oh my God, enough of this." I was not happy. Since losing the weight, I feel better about myself. I guess part of the body image is getting into clothes I couldn't get into before.

Kathy spoke about how shopping for clothes influenced her. She said, "If I'm looking for an evening dress, the cuts and styles are just not made to tailor towards different body types. Situations kind of make you feel that way, like, I'm fat." Mary expressed she hated shopping because clothes did not fit. She dreaded the Easter holiday because that meant shopping for an Easter dress. Linda also talked about how shopping for clothes had not been not easy for her. She shared the following example:

> I was in Dillards, and was looking like, oh, they got my size over here, a 14. So this other woman, she wasn't White; she may have been Asian. She was like, this isn't my size, this is for a lard-ass; and it was only a 14.

Intra-cultural Understanding of Black Women's Bodies

Participants agreed that a White standard of beauty exists, although some said it was "evolving." For example, Maureen affirmed the existence of White standards of beauty:

> Most definitely it (the societal standard of beauty) is racially defined. Even if you look at Tyra Banks, she doesn't look like she's—she's not like the image of a Black woman who has the boobs, the butt, and the thighs. You know, you need to be in a size 2 or 4. So it definitely is racially defined and it hasn't changed.

Meanwhile Sandy explained the evolution:

> I think it [the societal standard of beauty] is evolving to accept more ethnic kinds of beauty as long as they're still tall and thin. They can be darker skinned or have darker hair or have more ethnic features as long as they're still tall and thin—and young and wrinkle free. Somewhat, I think it's evolving and broadening to include features that are definitely more ethnic, just the whole thing with Jennifer Lopez's ass or wanting to have fuller lips. I think it's definitely broadened to include more heterogeneous kinds of different

> features that cross ethnic boundaries. But I still think it leans to a White standard of beauty.

Half of the participants commented on their understanding of how African American culture understands Black women's bodies. Some participants validated the idea that the African American community accepts women with larger body shapes and sizes. When addressing societal standards of beauty, Kathy commented, "African American women can be satisfied with a little more weight." When asked about how she came to have her particular body image, Sandy stated, "It's a little more accepted in society for African American women to be a little bit bigger, a little bit curvy." Sandy also provided an example from her sorority. She said:

> We'd tease each other when they'd lose weight. We'd be like, "Girl, what's wrong with you? You need to eat." You know, versus saying you're looking little fat. I don't even think that [looking fat] was ever really talked about. We had a couple of girls who were a little heavier and it wasn't, well let's all go on a diet together. It was just like, that's you. You're beautiful. Let's make you up and put some cute clothes on you and make you as cute as you are because that's just you.

Cathy said, "People in the African American culture think it's okay to be thick, or to not be skinny." She also said that body image has not really been addressed in her sorority. She said, "I think that, as Black people, we're not as affected, and caught up in the whole body image thing as a White woman would be." Maureen acknowledged that body image was not discussed in the Black community, "You don't have an eating disorder. And it was a secret if you did because you do not think of Black women being bulimic or anorexic. That's something that's been culturally a secret."

However, other participants acknowledged acceptance of larger shape and size by the African American community does not equate to body image satisfaction. Linda stated, "A lot of the time, people think Black people don't think about weight, but they do. Black people do view their bodies differently and eat differently, but it's becoming the same [as White people]." Mary said, "Women of all backgrounds are getting cosmetic surgery; it's not just a European thing." Maureen shared, "The media has impacted African American women so much that we are losing focus on what is important and how to be happy about our looks."

Health Awareness

Being healthy was a priority for most participants. Kathy indicated this when describing the perfect woman as "somebody that's healthy." All participants expressed a desire to lose weight through diet and exercise to improve their health and avoid future health problems. A family history of health problems increased the participant's body image awareness. Patty described her health awareness as the reason why she had been making changes in her life. She said:

> Health is a lot of the reason why I'm choosing to make a change in my life. I've seen too many people pass because of some medical reason that could have been altered had their lives been better and their food intake and taking care of their body overall. That's real significant when you watch two to three people die of heart disease or diabetes. You really have to think about if you want to suffer like that when you could prevent it at an early age.

When asked what she would change about her body, Maureen replied:

> Just losing a couple pounds because it's a health issue, especially with my family history of diseases—cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure. Just staying in tune health-wise, making sure later in life I'll be okay. I know I need to lose some weight just because I could be a diabetic at any time if I don't eat the right things and work out all the time.

Media Responsibility

The media (advertising, television shows, magazines and music videos) was described as a powerful force promoting an unattainable standard of beauty and negatively influencing participant's body image. Sandy spoke about an experience at the mall where advertising negatively affected her:

> I'll walk by and see big ads. I can't remember what they are wearing, what it was advertising for. I don't even remember the colors. My whole focus was like, look at how skinny they are.

Sandy also shared how images portrayed by the media have not been representative of the average woman. She said:

> I think that's why women spend a lot of time not feeling good about their bodies because even when you look at reality television, you don't see short, fat, non-attractive people on reality TV. There's never anybody who's ugly on reality TV. It's supposed to be a reflection of reality, but it's not real. I know that's probably part of the reason why I don't feel great about myself. It's not just celebrities anymore. It's just people that are supposed to be real are skinny.

Kathy explained how she resisted media images. She said:

> I don't watch too many videos. You're like, I'm fat because everybody has a bra on basically, a short top or halter-top. I can't do that. I think that the media doesn't really do a healthy job because when you don't see yourself, you think, maybe I'm not the norm. There's something wrong with me because everybody else think differently; but then you have to put it back in your head like it's just TV. So I'm going to pull a book out on my shelf to get some truth.

Kathy also provided an example of the media's attention on weight when she shared that television programs, such as The Parkers made fat jokes. Maureen discussed the power of media. "It has this whole hold on younger people and what they should be and what they should look like. Media by far has the biggest influence on people and their image, inner and outer." Peggy recognized the media's power influence on her when she said, "A lot of women today are dissatisfied with some area of their bodies based on media. Media tells you what you need to look like. I'm a victim because I keep buying all that crap that's out there."

Two participants mentioned that media can have a positive influence on body image by showing healthy role models, like Oprah Winfrey. Yet, Linda quickly noted that even the healthy role models have lost weight. She said, "You have different people come out who are bigger, like Monique, Angie Stone and Jill Scott, but even they have lost weight. Image is everything."

Age

Age influenced the participant's body image experience. As they got older, some women accepted their bodies more, while others struggled with the pressure to look young. When speaking about their current body image, Sandy and Mary explained that their bodies

shifted over time and didn't match up with their ideal body. Mary said:

> I'm going against the fact that I'm not as young as I used to be. Over 25, when you try to lose weight, it's a little harder. I think about losing weight now because I am 28, and I find myself sometimes being winded going up the steps.

Sandy agreed, "It gets harder the older you get." She stated, "Maybe it's just a function of my body changing, and I'm not used to that. But I definitely have more concerns now."

Participants spoke about society's obsession with youth. Sandy included being "wrinkle free and young looking" in her description of the societal standard of beauty. Kathy talked about the media's part in this by targeting young girls and conditioning them to look and be a certain way. Maureen reflected on how much things changed. She said:

> I think the younger generations want to look like what the media portrays, and they can do it in ways that are unhealthy. It's so amazing to me because when I was here, it was like, hey I know [Maureen] and she's a good person. But now it's like, I need to get into a size 2 because I want to wear some low-ride pants. They don't eat. They're talking about getting boob jobs, and I'm like, you're 16. Are you serious?

Kathy and Sandy talked about the changing standard of beauty, noting that when they were younger, the societal standard of beauty had been much more racially defined (White standard of beauty was more prevalent) than it is now. Three participants mentioned that working on a college campus and being surrounded with young college students affects their body image. Patty said, "Being an educator is a struggle because you work with young people a lot, which is not always a positive thing."

A few participants did suggest that as they have gotten older, they have grown to appreciate their bodies more, and in turn, had better body image. For instance, Patty said:

> It's something about coming of age, and at this point, I feel pretty good. A friend told me that you're going to know what your faults are, your good points, your bad points about your body, about you. You also know as you age, things will change because that's just natural in life. You just have to be okay with it. I think feeling good about yourself happens to women in an older age. They finally say, this is how I want to be. This is how I want to look.

Participants Reflect on the Meaning of Their Body Image

The final interview focused on the meaning participants assigned to their body image experiences. Overall, participants wanted to continue working towards their own body acceptance by accepting changes and making healthy choices. All participants stated that they were more aware of their body image compared to before the study and how it developed. They identified past emotional experiences that impacted their body image and questioned whether their thoughts, feelings, and actions had been motivated by self or societal standards. For instance, Sandy shared thoughts on her motivation:

> If I choose to [change something about my body], why am I doing something about it? Are those things an expectation for me or a societal expectation? Making me think about where that comes from and if I feel the need to change myself, why? I think that's a good thing to make sure that if you're changing something about yourself, it's because you want to or because it's something you value, not because it's something other people value.

Many of the participants saw themselves helping others in the future. Mary said:

> I see myself actually counseling and talking to women who are my age or younger, and even older about the same issues and letting them know it's not necessarily about your outer appearance all the time. I would love to see myself helping a woman for a more permanent type of change for body weight and body image, versus just temporary. Before I couldn't talk about it, but now I can. I find myself growing from this, also making healthier choices, whether it be people, the kind of things that I do in spare time, and how I eat.

Not only did Sandy want to give her daughters a healthy body image by combating negative influences that shape body image, she also wanted to give her sons healthy expectations of what women should look like.

Sorority Stereotypes and Body Image

Only three participants agreed their sorority had an image related to body image. Two participants acknowledged differences in sorority image are dependent upon chapter and region. Kathy described her sorority's stereotype as "friendly, but fat," but explained she did not fit this stereotype. Someone actually said to her, "I thought you were supposed to be fat." Linda said her sorority was "stereotyped as big, and known for being smart, nice, shy, alright looking and a little chubby." Patty shared:

> My sorority prides themselves on being graceful, stylish, petite, classy, confident, and convinced that they are the crème de la crème. You have to look good to carry those characteristics. We don't go anywhere unless we're dressed up. You have to have your look together at all times.

Maureen said there was no description of what you needed to look like in her sorority. Instead, they focused on personality and contributions that could be made, not looks. However, she went on to say, "You shouldn't look a mess with your hair everywhere and should represent yourself as a lady at all times whatever you look like." Sandy also did not think her sorority's image related to body image, but described her sorority as "typically darker skinned and sometimes from affluent backgrounds." Peggy didn't think her sorority had an image that related to body image. Yet, she said "Sorority sisters will make a comment when another sorority sister picks up weight." Two other participants expressed that everyone in their chapter looked different, and reiterated, "What mattered was not looks or size, but attitude and what one can offer."

Half of the women talked about other sororities' images and stereotypes. They described sorority X as having an image that included, "having light skin, long hair, and coming from an upper class background." Historically, this has been considered the "measuring stick" or "standard" for being a member of sorority X, and "is still prominent today." The standard "is hard to change because it's embedded in the history and founding." Linda suggested sorority X "has to maintain the pretty girl image." Maureen went on to say, "It's not talked about," although jokes have been made about it." For instance, Sandy joked, "I'm way too dark to be in sorority X." She said, "I laugh about it, but it's true. I don't look like a member of sorority X. If I met someone and told them I was in sorority X, they would be like, what?" Other sorority images and stereotypes were also noted. Sandy stated, "Sorority Y is kind of the fat girls sorority, and sorority Z were the ghetto girls who didn't have middles class values and attitudes like girls from sorority X or my sorority."

Half of the participants thought their body image changed as a result of being in their

sorority. Two women said it changed for the better. For example, Sandy said:

> I think my body image got healthier at that point, given the context of where I was. The school that I went to was predominantly White with a very small African American population. Because of my experiences there, it became much more important for me to align myself with the African American community within the school. And so then I found my way into a sorority. Had I not, I might have been more affected by the White European standard of what is acceptable. Being around a group of women that looked very similar to me, we all kind of had similar bodies. So I had a more healthy and accepting image. I think that's what played in to my being able to more easily accept my body as the way that it is, and just work within those parameters rather than try to pigeon-hole it into, okay my legs are just too fat—I need to get my legs skinnier.

Additionally, Mary shared how her body image changed for the better as a result of being in her sorority:

> Through my sorority, I was introduced to some beautiful, great women who were a lot larger than me. The confidence they had made their inner beauty shine outright so I found myself wanting to be like them. I opened my eyes to see that it's not just what size you are.

Patty's body image changed as a result of being in her sorority, but in a different way. After becoming a member, she remembers thinking she "would not wear her hair back anymore, but instead keep it curled." She said, "I am more conscious that I represent a group of women, and try hard to make sure that my total look is together."

Conclusion

The literature on African American women's body image satisfaction is contradictory and inconclusive. However, the results of this study clearly add to the growing body of research that African American women are just as likely as White women to have body image concerns about weight, shape and size. Most AASW in this study wanted to be thinner and cited the media as a reason for feeling bad about their bodies. Participants spoke about being depressed, having low self esteem, and in several extreme cases, talked about the use of diet pills and laxatives to cope. Furthermore, the emergence of how the participants looked in clothes placed continued emphasis on physical appearance.

The AASW in this study share similarities and differences with White sorority women in previous studies. For example, both groups are generally dissatisfied with their bodies, practice weight control, and judge their bodies harshly, and experienced some related interference in relationships (Alexander, 1998; Crandall, 1998; Hoerr, Bokram, Lugo, Bivins & Keast, 2002; Mecham, Pole & Bonifazi, 2001; Meilman, von Hippel & Gaylor 1991; Rolnik, Engeln-Maddox, & Miller, 2010; Schulken, 1997; Schwitzer, Rodriguez, Thomas & Salimi, 2001). However, for the AASW, fear of becoming fat had more to do with their family history of health problems. Additionally, the AASW did not reveal bulimic symptomology, like binging or purging by vomiting or excessive exercise.

Perhaps the most important finding in this study is that the participants did not appear to be culturally protected from experiencing body image dissatisfaction. To the contrary, many participants experienced pressures to be thin

from their family. Even though participants acknowledged that the African American community accepts a larger body size among women, they spoke at length about their personal dissatisfaction with their own weight, appearance, size and shape. The participants mentioned that body image concerns typically are not acknowledged in the Black community; but all of them said they thought about their body image "everyday."

The cultural protection literature asserts that African American women embrace a broader ideal. That did not appear to fully be the case with the AASW in this study. The literature also suggests that accurate perceptions of African American men's preferences for body shape serves as cultural protection. Yet in this study of AASW, men's preferences were only briefly noted as minimally influencing two participants. As the literature states, acculturation could be a possible explanation. The participants in this study were highly educated which could have resulted in greater compliance with White standards of beauty. This study supports Dacosta and Wilson's (1996) claim that cultural protection should be questioned.

After drawing interpretive conclusions, a few items remain unclear, prompting the following recommendations for future research. It is worth exploring whether AASW connect their pursuit of the ideal to the feminist argument that cultural messages are created by oppressive patriarchy. Aspects of this research imply that social class (levels of education and income) are factors that may influence AASW and adherence to White standards of beauty. Thus, this should be considered in future research. Additionally, AASW in this study did not discuss internalization of stereotypical portrayals, such as the "Jezebel" and "Mammy." Evolving standards of beauty and the differences between White and Black standards of beauty should be considered as well. Lastly, the AASW acknowledged that sorority stereotypes exist and are connected to appearance. It would be useful to examine sorority stereotypes based on appearance in depth, especially since two participants mentioned that their body image changed for the better as a result of sorority participation. This could be an important data point for national organizations to develop formal initiatives on health and body image awareness. Larson (2011) found that being a valued member of a group creates a sense of belonging which fosters self-esteem and was positively correlated to body image. Museus (2008) touts the benefits of ethnic student organizations ability to provide cultural familiarity, expression, advocacy, and validation. Sorority members also were found to be successful at building a sense of common purpose and ownership in the decision-making process in a study on socially responsible leadership (Martin, Hevel, & Pascarella, 2012). So, it seems that AASW women may be able to turn to their sororities for developing positive body image. Harper (2007) documents the benefits of participation in historically Black sororities and verifies that social support is needed for members.

Even though it was evident that AASW had been affected by cultural messages, after placing body image in the context of their lives, they began to question whether their thoughts, feelings, and actions had been motivated by self or society. Given this information, suggestions for practice include educational programming that addresses body image acceptance for AASW groups specifically. Schwartz (2012) has issued a call for sorority professionals to address the potential negative experiences of sorority members. Dalton & Crosby (2012) examined peer culture and the extracurriculum. These authors said, "student affairs staff play a critical role in helping to design and manage many of the influential out-of class experiences that students have in college" (p.7). Sorority members should be collaborators in dissonance-based prevention

that influences the norms of their members (Becker, 2008). If sorority women rely on their peers for social cues and sororities act as enforcers of unattainable cultural beauty ideals, members are likely to experience body dissatisfaction.

It is time for people who work with AASW to move beyond conclusions based upon anecdotal evidence and intuition (Hughey & Parks, 2012). Peer-led intervention programming that aligns with institutional diversity values and integrates formal aspects of the academic curriculum are recommended. This study creates a knowledge base and helps sorority advisors gain insight into how AASW experience and make meaning of body image. Body image dissatisfaction is pervasive among women in our culture. According to this study, AASW appear to be no exception.

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