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Socio-cultural Influences on Body Size Perception and Values among Polynesians

Lauren K. Williams (lkwil@deakin.edu.au)
Lina A. Ricciardelli (lina@deakin.edu.au)
Boyd A. Swinburn (swinburn@deakin.edu.au)
Marita P. McCabe (maritam@deakin.edu.au)
School of Psychology
Deakin University, Burwood VIC 3125 Australia

Abstract

Body image concerns have been predominantly studied in cultural groups that equate thinness with attractiveness and beauty. A large body size, however, has many positive connotations among Polynesians and may be a contributing factor to the high prevalence rates of obesity in this population. The purpose of this paper is to review, evaluate and integrate the socio-cultural influences that may determine the attitudes, beliefs and values regarding a larger body size among Polynesians. Historically, a large body size has been endorsed through social practices such as deliberate fattening of women to enhance beauty, reproductive capacity and life longevity. The traditional roles of food and community membership, together with more contemporary factors such as the media, are also important influences of body size among this population. These socio-cultural influences are reflected in the ideal, acceptable and perceived body size and also in levels of body dissatisfaction experienced by Polynesians. Whilst Polynesians have reported larger body sizes as more attractive and healthy than Caucasians, they maintain some Western standards by preferring a smaller ideal body size (particularly for younger men and women) and also report high levels of body dissatisfaction. One explanation for these findings relate to Polynesians perception of the relationship between actual weight and their beliefs about weight. Limitations of past studies and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Introduction

The study of the messages transmitted by the media, the family, and peers is one framework for examining the impact of socio-cultural influences on the development of body image concerns among adolescents and adults (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). However, one of the main limitations of this body of research is that the identified social forces have been studied predominantly among White adolescent girls and women, where the thin body size is valued more highly than it is in other cultural groups (Pollack, 1995a). To date there is limited theoretical or empirical work that has investigated the actual or perceived messages transmitted by the media, the family, and peers and the impact that these messages have on body image concerns and body change strategies in other cultures, particularly cultures that are likely to be accepting of a greater diversity of body sizes and those that place value on larger body sizes. Such work is important if we are to more fully understand how culture may moderate socio-cultural messages about weight and shape and also to provide a culturally sensitive approach to future interventions regarding body size.

One cultural group that has been identified as placing greater value on larger body sizes are Polynesians (Pollack, 2001). While there are other cultural groups that also maintain positive attitudes toward large body sizes, such as African-Americans (Poran, 2002), the present paper focuses exclusively on Polynesians. Polynesians have a rich historical tradition of social practices that endorse a large body size. However, to date there has been no synthesis of the research on body size perceptions and values that has been completed with this cultural group. The purpose of this paper is to review, evaluate and integrate past socio-cultural factors that have promoted attitudes, beliefs and values regarding a larger body size among Polynesians. Body size beliefs and values found among Polynesians will also be compared to those found in studies of Whites. In addition, limitations of past studies and recommendations for future research are addressed.

Social Practices Endorsing Large Body Size

In traditional Polynesian societies, a large body size is a mark of beauty, prestige, good health, wealth and high social ranking (Danielsson, 1958; Matangi, Swinburn, Craig, Matenga-Smith & Vaughan, 1995; Pollack, 1995a,b). One social practice, identified in the literature, that is specifically aimed at increasing body size among this population relates to social fattening practices. Another cultural factor that also contributes to the larger body size among this population relates to the social significance of food. Thirdly, the importance of community membership, as opposed to individualism, is a factor that contributes to the pursuit of a large body size among Polynesian populations.

Fattening Practices

Ha'apori (Fattening practices: ha'apori literally, to make fat) have been consistently reported in Polynesian history (Danielsson, 1958; Metraux, 1971; Oliver, 1989; Pollack, 1995; van Dijk, 1991) and also among other non-Western cultures (Brink, 1995), as a means of increasing body weight. Selected men and women (generally teenagers) and in some cases pre-pubertal children (Buck, 1938), underwent a purposeful fattening process whereby they were shut in a large shed, undertook little physical activity and were fed...
large quantities of food. Seclusion was also intended to lighten/bleach skin colour. During this time, which was usually a period of several months, the Polynesians engaged in *Ha'a pori* did not get up except for the necessary bodily functions, and slept as much as they could in order to become as fat as possible (Oliver, 1974). These fattening practices were particularly evident among the 'chiefty' class, and continued past childbearing into middle age. Those who emerged from the ritual (in parades of public appreciation) were seen to have achieved an enhanced beauty in terms of body size and lightened skin colour. Despite the hardship associated with getting fat, Polynesians wanted to be submitted to such a regime because, during the rest of their lives, they felt the benefit of the period of fattening. This regime made them stronger and stouter than the others, and therefore, increased their level of attractiveness (Buck, 1938).

Whilst these fattening practices promoted the traditional view of attractiveness among Polynesian communities, an alternative explanation for these practices has also been suggested (Oliver, 1974; Pollack, 1995). The provision of an increased food supply to women, and particularly to young women at puberty was seen to enhance chances of conception. The view that females with a fuller figure are more sexually mature, fertile, and suitable for childbirth and child rearing has been supported elsewhere (Raphael & Lacey, 1992). Whilst the ability of females to procreate may have played a role in captivating males, the aesthetic phenotype that indicated good fertility and reproductive capability was more commonly viewed as having important evolutionary implications that was critical in cultures aiming to maintain their population (Darwin, 1901). Large body size was also a symbol of high social status, with chiefs attaining the largest possible body size to reflect the prosperity of his people. There is some evidence that fattening practices also exist among other cultures (Brink, 1995). For example, some African cultures maintain a strong positive perception of large body size given the association between small body size and poverty and disease. There is limited information available concerning the current prevalence of fattening practices among Polynesian communities. It appears that specific ritualistic fattening practices do not exist, however, what does remain are concerns of the normalisation of large volumes of food eaten and the endorsement of large body size maintained among Polynesian populations (Evans et al, 2001; Evans et al, 2003; Pollack, 1995).

**Food**

Two aspects of food consumption have also been associated with weight status among Polynesians. The first is related to the actual food consumption, type, content and availability among Polynesian communities, which has generally indicated a diet that consists of non-nutritious imported foods that are high in carbohydrates (Evans, Sinclair, Fusimalohi & Liava’a, 2001). The second aspect relates to the cultural significance of food among this population. Feasts included in large-scale public festivals have been consistently maintained among this cultural group. For example, the ripening of food, birth of a child and the lack of a cash economy are all reasons for feasts (Oliver, 1974; Oliver, 1989). In addition, ownership of food-producing land and agricultural expertise has become closely associated with higher levels of eating and a larger weight status. This is in an attempt to demonstrate both the individual and the community's wealth and prosperity. In contrast, a small body size became to be associated with laziness and a poorer capacity to work (Greska, 1995; Morton, 1996).

Food among Polynesian communities also has a strong social significance (Pollack, 2001). For example, food sharing has been cited as the medium for creating, maintaining and extending social relations (Messer, 1984). More specifically, it has been noted that in Polynesian culture, food is the facilitator for many social relationships between communities (Oliver, 1989; Pollack, 2001). In addition, high status foods (such as chicken) are often offered to visitors and those of higher social ranking (Bindon, 1982), as a mark of respect and hospitality.

The role of food rituals in maintaining culture among Polynesians has also been demonstrated in the offering, preparation and serving of food (Buck, 1938; Oliver, 1974). To offer food is to be generous and to refuse food is not culturally accepted. In addition, the act of one person feeding another is more a sign of care than the satisfaction of hunger (Gregg, 2000). Therefore, to refuse food that has been offered indicates a refusal to accept care from the community.

**Community Focus**

The cultural value of maintaining a community focus, as opposed to exercising individual aspirations, has also been cited as a factor that helps to promote a larger body size among Polynesians (Fusitu’a & Coxan, 1998; Morton, 1996). This cultural value has been found to influence the perception of self and body maintained by this population (Becker, 1995). In contrast, Westerners' fascination with their bodies and space is a product of their construction of the self as autonomous, independent and individual (Becker, 1995; Gregg, 2000). Polynesians, however, view the self as relational and interdependent with the community. Therefore, what differentiates Polynesians from Westerners is not their ability to construct an ideal body size and the values associated with it, but rather their degree of interest and investment in personally attaining this ideal through nurturing and disciplining the body (Becker, 1995). This means that dieting or weight management can often be perceived as selfish, because the individual is self-focused as opposed to being community-focused.

More recent research has examined the role of age in moderating the socio-centric values and body size beliefs held among Polynesians (Gregg, 2000).
Findings have generally indicated that younger Polynesian women are more committed to individual rights and express more concern about their weight and body image than older women, which perhaps indicates a shift towards more Western ideals. However, the desired slimness expressed by these young Polynesian women had a very different meaning than for young Western women. Gregg (2000) maintained that young Western women perceive appearance as manifesting desirable character traits that reflect the individual. Young Polynesian women, on the other hand, believed that it was desirable to remain slim because men found it attractive, which is again more consistent with their sociocentric disposition. Older and/or married Polynesian women were also more likely to focus on their role as a nurturer within the community and devote less time and energy on the cultivation of their own bodies. The relationship between egocentric and sociocentric values was most influenced by the role Polynesian women played within their village or community. For example, Polynesian women who found themselves more closely tied to the community were less concerned with their bodies and more focussed on others.

**Media, Family and Peers**

Actual messages that adolescents and adults receive from the media, family, peers and other community members, and how individuals interpret the content of these messages, has been extensively studied among Western populations in both the United States and Australia (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; McCabe, Ricciardelli & Ridge, 2004; Pike & Rodin, 1991; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). However, only one study was located that examined how similar messages are viewed among Polynesians. Eating attitudes and behaviours, following the introduction of television, were studied among ethnic Fijian adolescent girls (Becker et al., 2002). Results indicated that body image concerns and disordered eating increased from 12.7% to 29.2%, three years after the introduction of television. Similarly, self-induced vomiting to control weight increased from 0% to 11.3%. Respondents consistently articulated in narrative accounts the desire to lose weight to become more like Western television characters. Respondents also felt that the Western customs presented on television conflicted with their traditional values that endorse a larger body size. Clearly, additional studies are needed to more fully understand how the impact of modernisation may be moderated by many of the more traditional views about the benefits of a larger body size.

**Body Size Beliefs and Values among Polynesians**

Only six studies were located that examined Polynesians views of their own body size and related attitudes about their body image (Brewis, McGarvey, Jones & Swinburn, 1998; Craig, Swinburn, Matenga-Smith, Havila-Matenga & Vaughan, 1996; Craig, Halavatau, Comino & Caterson, 1999; Matangi, Swinburn, Craig, Matenga-Smith & Vaughan, 1995; Metcalf, Scragg, Willoughby, Finai & Tipene-Leach, 2000; Wilkinson, Ben-Tovim & Walker, 1994). All six studies were conducted with adult populations (>18 years) and were cross-sectional in design. No studies have been located, to date, that examine body size perceptions and beliefs among adolescent Polynesians.

In terms of the body size valued as most aesthetically appealing, Polynesians have been found to value fuller figured bodies as more attractive and healthy (Craig, Halavatau, Comino & Caterson, 1999; van Dijk, 1991), report overweight status at a larger body size than Western groups (Brewis, et al, 1998) and find smaller body sizes as less acceptable than Westerners (Craig Swinburn, Matenga-Smith, Havila-Matenga & Vaughan, 1996). Researchers have also indicated gender differences between Polynesians' preference for a healthy and attractive body size. For example, Craig et al, (1999) found that Polynesian men chose healthy and attractive body sizes for females that were significantly larger than those chosen by women. Individual accounts of attractiveness has been described by Polynesian women who reported that they felt more attractive, stronger and fitter at higher weight levels than same-weight Australian women (Craig et al, 1999).

Consistent with findings conducted with women in Western cultures, research has indicated that Polynesian men and women prefer body sizes smaller than their perceived sizes (Brewis et al, 1998; Craig et al, 1999; Craig et al, 1996; Matangi et al, 1995) and experience high levels of body dissatisfaction (Brewis, 1998). However, the preference for a smaller body size tends to diminish with age, with older Polynesian women reporting a preference for larger body sizes (Craig et al, 1999; Craig et al, 1996; Matangi et al, 1995). Several studies have also highlighted an inconsistency in Polynesians ability to estimate their own body size. Polynesians have been found to underestimate (Metcalf et al, 2000), overestimate (Craig et al, 1996; Craig et al, 1999) and be remarkably accurate in selecting their perceived body size (Craig et al, 1996). Finally, the ideal body size selected by Polynesians remains larger than the ideal body size selected by Western populations (Craig et al, 1996; Matangi et al, 1995).

Overall, these findings indicate two main differences between body size beliefs held by Western and Polynesian populations. Firstly, Polynesians report larger ideal and preferred body sizes than Western populations. Secondly, Polynesian men preferred body sizes smaller than their perceived sizes. These findings also indicated similarities between the two cultures, that relate both to the seemingly universal trend for women to prefer a smaller ideal body size and the high levels of body dissatisfaction evident between the two groups.

Given that these latter findings were particularly true for younger Polynesian women, it is possible that these results may indicate that the gradual reduction in the
ideal and acceptable body sizes experienced in Western societies is being adopted in young Polynesian women. For example, one study indicated that younger Polynesian women had similar perceptions of ideal body size to Australian women (Matangi et al, 1995). Older Polynesians on the other hand may have retained the cultural values of a larger body size as the ideal. In this case, these traditional values may account for the tendency for Polynesians to report larger ideal and preferred body sizes than Western populations. It is interesting to observe that Polynesian men had a desire to adopt a smaller body size than they perceived to maintain. This finding contrasts those with Western men who tend to prefer body sizes that are larger than their perceived size. This desire to be larger for Western men is tied to cultural views of masculinity and the male gender role that associates strength, power and masculinity with increased body size (Gillett & White, 1992; O'Sullivan & Tiggemann, 1997). The desire for Polynesian men to be smaller appeared to be more likely in those who overestimated their body size and may therefore represent a desire to reduce their weight to more closely resemble the body size inherent in Western culture.

The role of modernisation is likely to support these explanations. Westernisation in many Polynesian societies has introduced the Western perception of body size, where beauty, health and high status are equated with a thin or muscular body size for females and males respectively (Matangi et al, 1995). The effect of modernisation has been demonstrated in some Polynesian populations where Samoan women residing in Auckland had lower body size ideals than Samoan women residing in Samoa (Brewis et al, 1998). Samoan women residing in Samoa also ranked larger bodies as attractive compared to Samoan women residing in Auckland (Brewis et al, 1998). The opposite trend was true for males. For example, Samoan men residing in Auckland expressed a significantly larger ideal body size than Samoan men residing in Samoa. Furthermore, Samoan men residing in Auckland ranked larger body sizes as attractive and healthy compared to Samoan men residing in Samoa (Brewis et al, 1998).

Of further interest is the observation that many Polynesians experience high levels of body dissatisfaction. One study indicated that 41.9% of Samoan women and 45.9% of Samoan men were dissatisfied with their weight (Brewis, 1998). This is especially interesting given that others have reported that Polynesian women are less preoccupied with fatness than Western women (Wilkinson et al, 1994). Contrary to findings among Western women, it is possible that Polynesians do not experience body dissatisfaction from their belief that they maintain a large body size. In fact, research has shown that a relationship between actual weight status and negative attitudes towards one's body (including views that the body is a source of shame and distress) was evident among Australian women, and not among Samoan women (Wilkinson, Ben-Tovim & Walker, 1994).

Summary, Limitations and Recommendations

In summary, several social and cultural explanations, including fattening practices, the social significance of food and the role of socio-centric values, have been offered to account for the preference of a larger body size among Polynesians. Actual beliefs and values regarding body size among Polynesians were also reviewed. It appears that there are some similarities (such as the preference for a smaller ideal body size) and differences (such as perceived body size concerning body size beliefs, which exist between Polynesian and Western cultures. Two explanations, including the role of modernisation, and the relationship between body size beliefs and actual weight, were offered to account for these similarities and differences.

One of the main limitations of the studies reviewed is that they all relied exclusively on cross-sectional designs, thus they cannot address time-order relationships and developmental change. Future studies need to include a longitudinal evaluation of the variables being examined so that temporal relationships can be established. In addition, only one study was located that has investigated the source and influence of socio-cultural messages Polynesians received. Additional research is also needed to assess the nature of the relationships between the cultural practices that have been identified as influencing large weight status and Polynesians own body size beliefs and values. A qualitative approach may compliment previous quantitative research and offer more appropriate and informative research given that this method is designed to extract rich context-specific information. Finally, given that only one study with adolescents was located, there is a need to include adolescents in future research. This is also an important age group because recent data suggest that there is a marked increase in weight from the age of 14 to 25 years among Polynesians (Metcalf et al, 2000). A better understanding of the factors that promote a larger body size among Polynesians will be used to develop more effective programs to reduce the prevalence of obesity.

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