

Ethnicity and Attitudes toward Obesity

By

Barbara Jaurequi, MS, LMFT, MAC

(Originally Published Under the Name of Barbara Nahas)

Numerous research studies have found that opinions about obesity differ among ethnic groups (Kolotkin, et al. 2001; Omari, 2004; Price & Pecjak, 2003; Sobal & Stunkard, 1989).

Specifically, studies have found that ethnic groups differ in their perspectives regarding acceptable body size. One study utilized two focus groups made up of African American urban women who considered themselves overweight. The group discussions focused on various themes including body image, culture, and psychological factors. Researchers found that African American women differ from women in other ethnic groups in that they have a higher degree of acceptance of larger body sizes (Omari, 2004). The study also found that it was not acceptable in African American culture to denigrate and humiliate individuals because they are obese. This differs to some degree from the Caucasian Americans who generally see obesity as a sign of weakness and poor character (DeJong, 1993; Price & Pecjak, 2003).

Like African Americans, Asian Americans also differ from other ethnic minority groups regarding ideal body type preferences. While African Americans and Latino Americans are more accepting of fuller body types, Asian Americans have a thin body type preference that is similar to body type preferences of Caucasian Americans (Barnett, Keel, & Conoscenti, 2001). A recent study found that normal sized Asian American women felt their current figure was larger than their ideal figure. In fact, Asian American women identified a preferred body type that was

smaller than their current figure even when they were at an ideal weight for their age and height. Their ideal figure was also smaller than the ideal figure reported by Caucasian women.

In sum, the literature suggests that, in general, African Americans and Latino Americans favor fuller body types. In contrast, Caucasian Americans and Asian Americans show a preference for thinner body types.