

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Young Adult Perception of Body Weight:



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Gender, Ethnicity and Media Influence

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Abstract

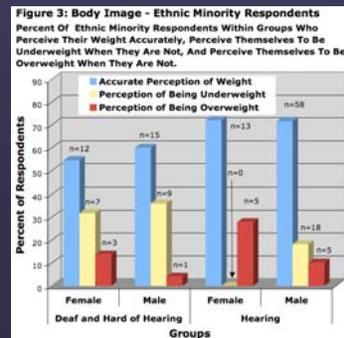
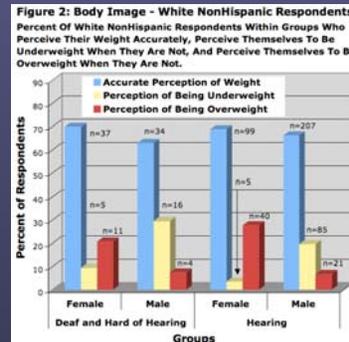
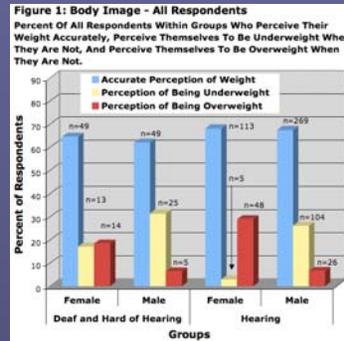
155 deaf and hard of hearing and 514 hearing young adults were administered the National Center for Deaf Health Research Health Behavior Survey (NCDHR-HBS). Self perception of body mass index (BMI) and relative body weight, gender and ethnicity were analyzed. The majority of men and women, both hearing and deaf/hard of hearing, accurately identified their body weight. However, a large percentage of the remaining hearing and deaf/hard of hearing women misperceived themselves to be overweight. Deaf/hard of hearing women of other ethnicities tended to have less distortion of body weight overall. We speculate that these results may be related to the impact of media on societal messages of thinness, and attribute gender and ethnic differences in perception of body weight to media accessibility and influence.

Introduction

Media influences self-perception of body weight and body image (Harrison, 2001; Schooler et al, 2004). Higher levels of overall television viewing correlate with greater body dissatisfaction (Harrison, 2001). Young women who watch even 30 minutes of television programming and advertising had altered perceptions of the shapes of their bodies as well as altered moods (Myers and Biocca, 1992). Men exposed to even a brief presentation of advertisements showing muscular men compared to a control group viewing neutral advertisements displayed a significantly greater discrepancy between their own perceived muscularity and their ideal body size (Leit et al, 2002).

Gender and Ethnicity

U.S. women are more likely to perceive themselves as overweight than U.S. men. Likewise, Caucasian people are more likely than African American/Black people to perceive themselves as overweight (Paeratakul et al, 2002). Black women report fewer body image distortions than White women (Wildes et al, 2001). The occurrence of fewer images of Black individuals in the media may be protective against distorted body image. Social comparison theory suggests that comparisons are typically made to others that are similar to oneself. Therefore, members of ethnic groups may be comparing themselves to members of their own group rather than to the White media ideal. Greater television viewing has been found to result in more bulimic symptomatology for White girls than Black girls (Botta, 2000). Comparing Black and White women's television viewing habits, White women with greater exposure to programming had poorer body image, while Black women did not show this pattern. Further, there appeared to be a protective effect when watching shows with all-Black casts (Schooler et al, 2004).



Methods

The 80 question NCDHR-HBS is a pen and paper survey that was administered to an incoming freshman sample. Deaf/hard of hearing students were administered the survey during the week prior to classes commencing, and hearing students took the survey approximately 4 weeks into their first quarter. Results were analyzed from the responses of 155 deaf and hard of hearing and 514 hearing freshman.

Results

Results indicate the majority of men and women (50-67.6%), regardless of hearing status, accurately identified themselves as underweight, normal weight, or overweight as determined by their BMI category (Figure 1). 81.2-88.9% of the remaining men, regardless of hearing status or ethnicity, perceived themselves to be underweight. By contrast, the self perception of relative weight of the remaining women depended on hearing status and ethnicity. The majority of the remaining hearing white women perceived themselves to be overweight, regardless of BMI category (89.4%). A lesser percentage of the remaining deaf/hard of hearing white women also perceived themselves as overweight, regardless of BMI category (68.8%) (Figure 2). Deaf/hard of hearing women of other ethnicities, however, were the only female group in which the majority of respondents did not perceive themselves as overweight (50% overweight, 50% underweight) (Figure 3).

Discussion

These results support the hypothesis that conventional media messages regarding the value of slimness significantly influence both hearing and deaf/hard of hearing women and men, though to a lesser degree for deaf/hard of hearing women. Further, results support existing studies demonstrating less misperception of weight in ethnic minority groups, although only in the female deaf/hard of hearing group. This suggests that being deaf/hard of hearing and non-white may be protective for females in this sample against the misperception of being overweight. The lack of this finding among hearing ethnic minority respondents in this sample suggests the possibility that less access to media, as well as being a less targeted group by the media in general, may reduce inaccurate self perception of body weight. There is also evidence to suggest that cultural affiliation is protective for body image dissatisfaction. Our survey did not include a measure of cultural identity. Further studies should investigate this link for deaf/hard of hearing individuals who affiliate with Deaf culture.