

“Real Women Have Curves”:
Body Image Paradoxes among Latina
Women in the US



Anahí Viladrich, PhD, MPhil, MA
Assistant Professor
Director, Immigration and
Health Initiative
Urban Public Health Program
Hunter College, CUNY

November 5, 2007



Presentation Prepared for the 2007
Annual Meeting of the American Public
Health Association

Co-Authors

Nancy Bruning, MPH

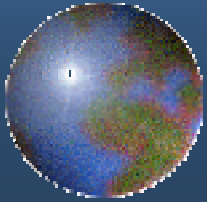
Ming-Chin Yeh, PhD

Rachael Weiss, MPH Candidate

Immigration and Health Initiative

Urban Public Health Program

Hunter College of the City University of New York





BODY IMAGE

- ✦ Body image categories (distortions, body ideals and self-assessment) provide useful data towards understanding Latinas' obesity trends and the barriers they encounter in engaging in healthy behaviors, including regular physical activity and weight-control programs.
- ✦ Learning from what Latinas “*have to say*” about body image can contribute to the design of culturally appropriate and effective interventions aimed at reducing weight-related disorders in this population.
- ✦ Body image varies across race/ethnicity, class and gender, and research on Latinas' body image assessments (e.g., distortion and satisfaction) is limited and inconclusive.

METHODS

Six focus groups of Latinas were conducted in New York City, two consisting of physically active women and four of non-physically active ones. A combined data collection system was used based on individual instruments and group guidelines.

Group Questions:

Group questions addressed Latinas' cultural and personal factors related to the cultural and social influences on body weight and shape, participants' body satisfaction vis-à-vis their weight control efforts.

Individual measures:

- a) Individual questionnaires collected women's basic sociodemographic characteristics.
- b) A body shape rating scale measured participants' height, weight, and current and ideal body shape (BS) ratings. The body shape rating scale, consisting of 9 female silhouettes ranging from very thin (1.0) to very heavy , (9.0), was used to determine BS 1 – BS 4.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Results		
Category	Sample (n)	Percent (%)
Foreign Born	31	70.5
Dominican Republic	21	47.7
Mexico	2	4.5
Other	8	18.2
Born in US	13	29.5
Age (Mean 38.7 ± 10.7)		
Age 18-30	13	31.7
Age 31-45	15	36.6
Age 46 plus	13	31.7
Education Level		
Completed high school	4	9.3
Completed college	30	69.8
College plus	9	20.9
Marital Status		
Married	9	20.5
Single	21	47.7
Other	14	31.8
Income Level		
Less than \$25,000	11	25.6
\$25,000 - 50,000	20	46.5
More than \$50,000	12	27.9
BMI (Mean 27.5 ± 7.0)		
Normal	19	45.2
Overweight	12	28.6
Obese	11	26.2

A total number of 44 bilingual Latinas over the age of 18 was recruited to answer individual questionnaires and participate in focus groups.

Results: Body Image and Body Mass Index

(Rachael Weiss and Ming-Ching Yeh)

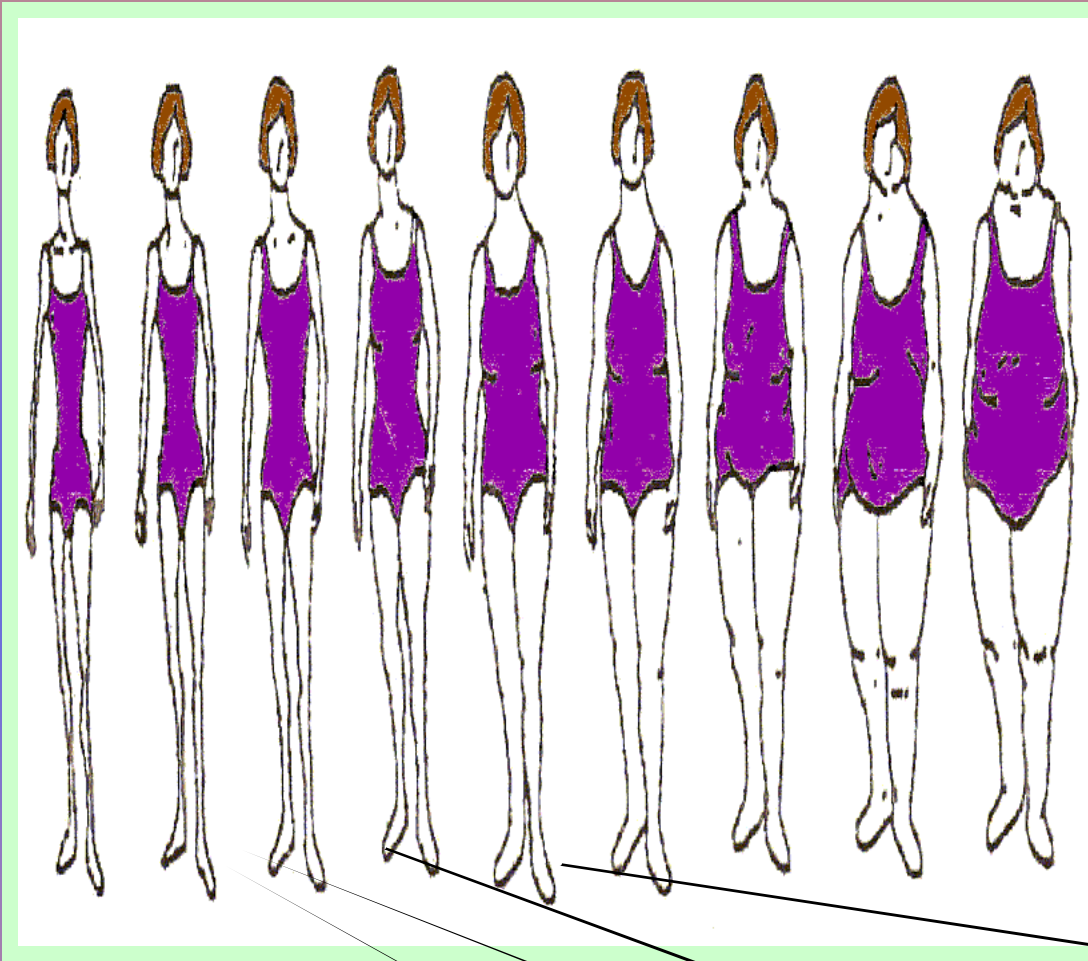


Table 2: Participants Mean Body Shape Scores by Body Mass Index

BMI	BS 1	BS 2	BS 3	BS 4
Normal Weight	3.5 (± 0.8)	2.7 (± 0.6)	2.7 (± 0.7)	2.9 (± 0.9)
Overweight	4.8 (± 1.0)	3.1 (± 0.6)	2.8 (± 0.7)	2.7 (± 0.8)
Obese	5.7 (± 1.0)	3.9 (± 0.7)	3.4 (± 0.7)	2.8 (± 1.1)

BS 1: Your current size and shape?

BS 2: The size and shape you would most like to be?

BS 3: The size and shape you feel is most attractive?

BS 4: The size and shape you feel men find the most attractive?

How can we explain these results?

The Impact of Mainstream Messages

- **Participant, Group 6:** *“I think the media has an immense part to do with it. I mean, on TV and in the magazines and what you see is these thin women, you know, it’s the same thing over and over. On TV and shows it’s the same thing, it’s the same look, it’s the same size...”*
- **Moderator:** *“Regardless of race and ethnicity or you’re thinking about the typical women that is White?”*
- **Participant:** *“Oh now, I mean, it’s usually White, it’s usually thin, it’s usually bigger chested, bigger breasts... Like that’s constantly what you see on TV shows. So if you see that, I mean Barbie, HELLO! Like Barbie alone, you know, that’s what little girls always want (these) Barbies. And they always want the White Barbie with the blue eyes and blonde hair, and none of them like the darker Barbie! So it’s something that girls see from the very very beginning and it’s almost near impossible to control because, what are you gonna do? I mean, you have little kids watching TV all the time...”*

Unrealistic Expectations



- *Moderator (Group 1): “So you agree that those models you get from magazines...”*
- *Participant 1: “Oh yeah! They put a lot of pressure.”*
- *Participant 2: “On Desperate Housewives, they are so skinny I mean...”*
- *Participant 1: “They are desperate because they are hungry!”*
- *Participant 2: “Yeah I know.”*
- *Participant 3: “I mean... I look at Terri Hatcher, she’s so skinny and I’m like oh my God! (This is how) I used to be when I was teenager; I actually kept my teenage weight for a long time, into my mid-thirties. Even in 2000 I was a size 2 and 4, now I’m a 6. Sometimes I’m in between 6 and 8 and as soon as I’m getting close to 8 I’m like: ok, I have to lose weight...”*

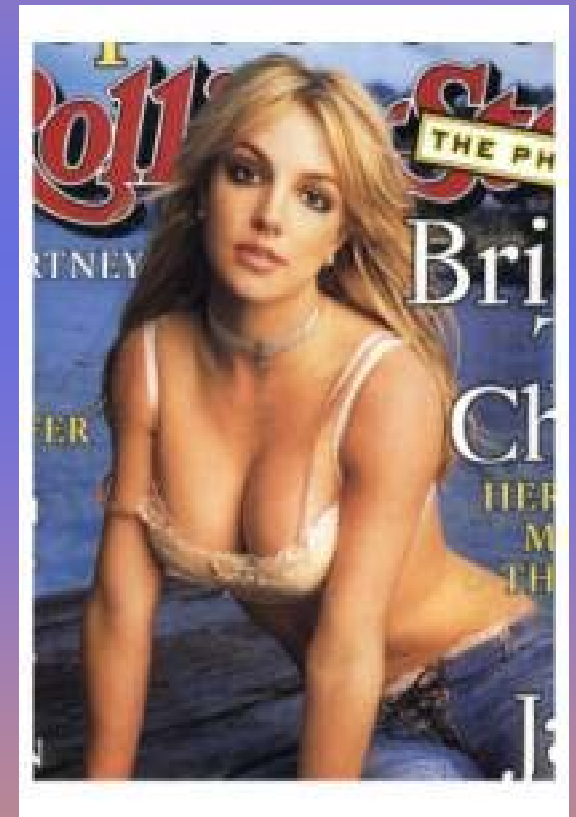
Mainstream Commands

- Participant (Group 4): *“It sends out an expectation. I mean, for you to be considered attractive you have to be thin. When I was a teenager and I was a little bit heavier. Actually a little bit thinner but I was a little bit curvier than most of the girls my age. And I was told that I needed to be thinner if I wanted to have a boyfriend. So...if you’re a women that’s divorced and very overweight, people start to think: she didn’t take care of herself, that’s why she doesn’t have one’. So it’s like, you’re not attractive if you aren’t thin. So if you want people to love you, you have to be thin.”*

Mainstream American Body Type

Moderator, Group 2: *“What is the American type?”*

Participant: *“Skinny, big breasts. You know your thighs are supposed to be smaller than your top, and very, very skinny as opposed to a lot of the Latina women you know. Your thighs are kind of shaped bigger than the top of your body and that kind of thing... I have noticed that American women, the ones that are physically like that (because no woman can be like that), they try to exercise so much and they are always saying: ‘I need to lose this and that!’”*

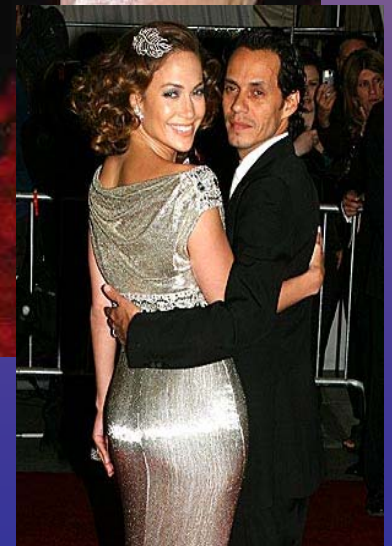


Changing Mainstream Messages

- Participant 1, Group 4: *“That’s really changed though (referring to the slim norm). I guess it’s kind of like it started with J-Lo because she’s in the mainstream and look at her: she obviously has hips! So now you’re seeing, like... It’s weird: you start to see Caucasian and Asian girls that now are going to the gym to work it out (their butts). They even have butt implants. They’re willing to go buy what they didn’t want before. That used to be discriminated against!”*
- Participant 2, Group 4: *“Thank god for Jennifer Lopez that made the cross to popular culture!”*

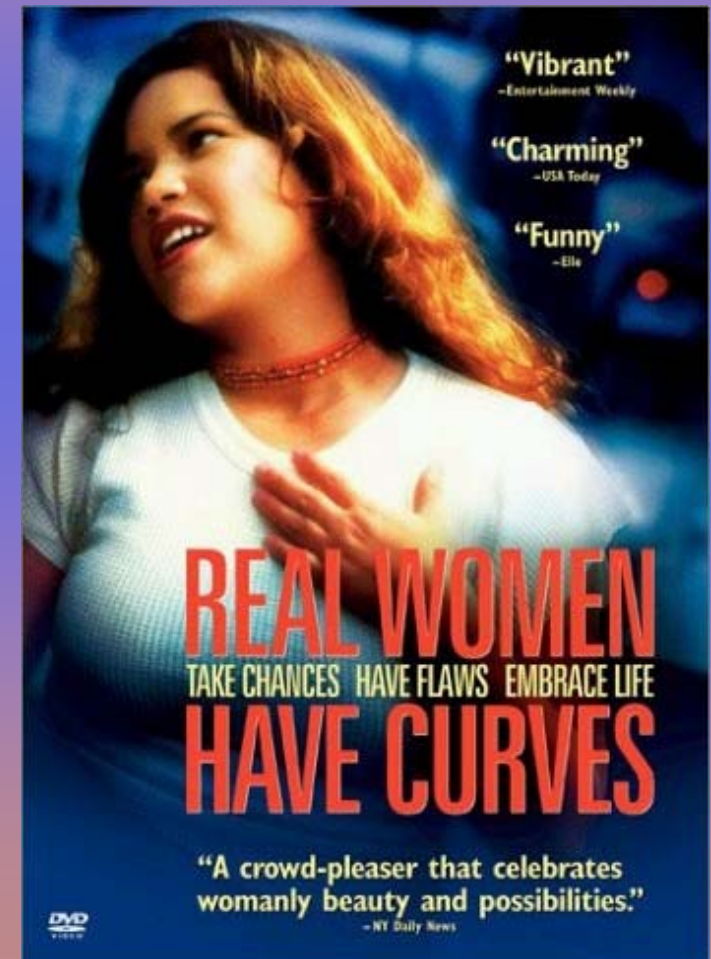
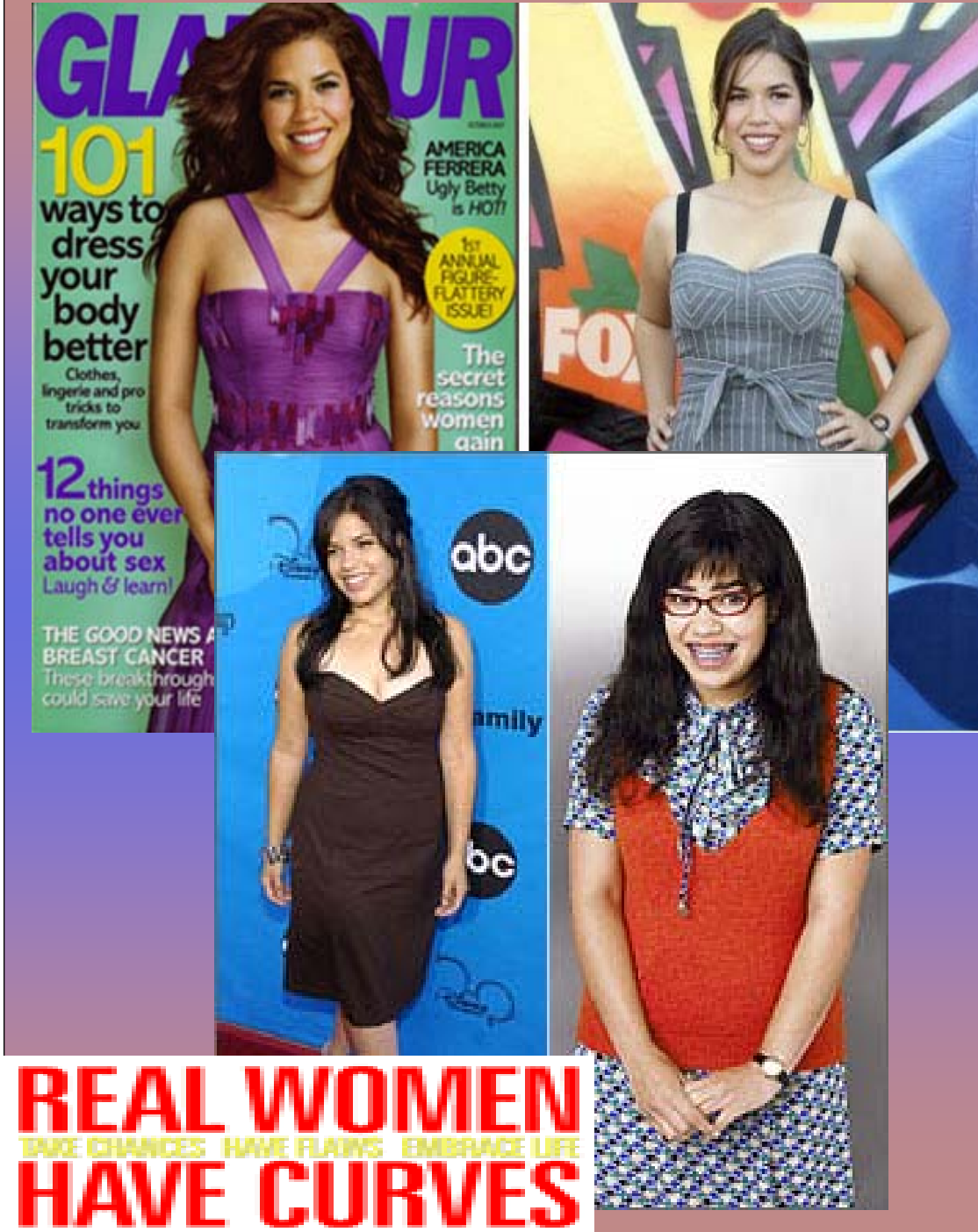


From Coca-Cola Shaped Gals to Shrinking Violets: The Rise of Public Latinidad



Media Pioneers

Alternative Body Types



REAL WOMEN
TAKE CHANCES HAVE FLAWS EMBRACE LIFE
HAVE CURVES

Mainstream Messages

- Participant, group 6: *“Another thing that’s different from Caucasians. I think Latinas, yes, they eat a lot of things but they’re more flexible with their curves. You can be thin but there needs to be curves there. But I think Caucasians like Kate Moss, which is like a thin rail, and it’s straight... and my friends... they don’t want to look like that. They don’t want to look like a supermodel with no curves.””*



Contesting Mainstream Norms

- *I've gotten so used to hearing it and so used to: 'Oh, you should lose weight, you should do this, and you should do that. Look at you. Nobody's gonna want you. How are you gonna get a boyfriend? ' And dadada.' ...*
- *"... And you must have all heard about the Dove program, how the Dove commercials (show) about true beauty. And it says basically like: what's beautiful for you is not beautiful for me. You know, and it's all about kind of like self-image and stuff. I actually have the privilege to meet with them and to talk to them about it, because I was planning this thing for them to come to the school to talk to girls and to talk to guys..."*
(Participant: Group 3)



From Fictional Characters To Real Life Pals

➤ **Participant, Group 2:**

“You know I have friends who are Latina, I have friends who are white... but when it comes to my Latina friends, you know: Yeah! They have curves! And she’s like: Yes, I’m shapely... When it comes to my friends that are white, they are always trying to hide certain things when they go to clubs, and they don’t dance. At least that’s what comes to the way they use their body, this is what I’ve seen. If anything, I see a lot of low fat this, non-fat that (among her White friends).”



Latinas' Curves



Participant (Group 2):

“The main difference is like; I think we are more comfortable that a woman should have some shape. And necessarily that doesn't mean that you are real, real skinny. Although I believe that the new generation born here or whatever, is getting more and more away from that mentality so they're trying to fit in the American type or (to) what you are supposed to be.”

Latina Body Type

Participant (Group 4):



“My daughter, in her school she has a lot of friends that are American, Jewish, and Asian, and she was this year the only Hispanic in her class. And now I created my space because I wanted to see what she’s doing... So I looked to some of her friends (just to) learn but many of them, the comments that they make are like: “You’re so lucky to be Latina. You have a nice butt. And these unbelievable comments!””

Latino Men Like Curves!

- Participant 1, Group 6: *“Los Latinos le dan mas importancia a las mujeres con buenos cuerpos que los no-Latinos. No les importa a los que no son Latinos, pero los Latinos si. A los Latinos les gusta ver la mujer bien heavy, como ellos dicen alla. Heavy, heavy, en Santo Domingo dicen que ‘tu cuerpo esta heavy.’ O sea, tu cuerpo esta mejor...”*
- Moderator: *“That’s good. That’s related also to having more pounds than being a skinny girl?”*
- Participant 2: *“Exactly, that means it, it’s not a real thin body: it has curves!”*



Latino Men Like Curves!

- **Participant, group 5:**

The only thing I can say that I know from my own country that is important in my life is that... They don't like (you) when you're too skinny. Like some of the guys (will say): 'Oh, you're too skinny, you don't look right!' And then you gain more and it's like: 'Oh yeah.'"



Latinas' Body Shapes



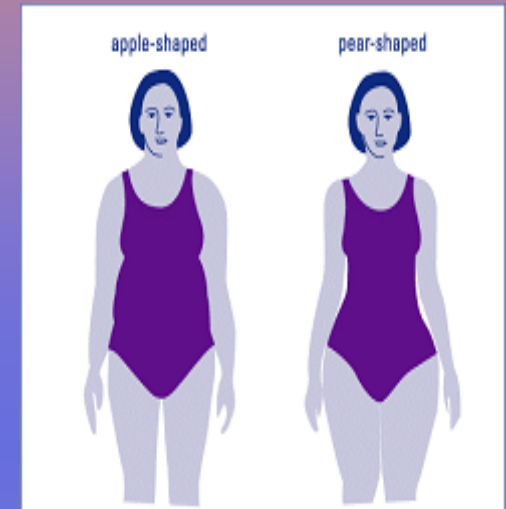
Group 4

- **Participant 1:** (as a Latina) *“You have to have nice round hips and a big butt and your chest looks fine, but your waist has to be very narrow... Curves are accepted if you have the hourglass figure.”*
- **Participant 2:** *“It’s okay if you have some hips. It’s okay to have butt. Thicker legs are considered more attractive than narrow legs, but if you have a bubble butt. And if you are Caucasian they’re not considering that attractive because you’re supposed to have a small tiny back. And for Latinas, the bigger the better!”*

Pear-shaped Women

Group 6

- Moderator: “As Hispanic women the norm is what?”
- Participant: *Curves*. “A pear-shaped woman. Yeah, if you’re too skinny... it’s funny because I was with a friend of mine and she was getting her wedding dress put on, and me and another one were looking at this woman, Caucasian. She looked so good in her dress because she had curves, and me and my friend were commenting on it. She couldn’t hear us but the first thing she complained about was: ‘Oh my God: look at these hips!’ ‘And me and my friend told her: ‘Are you kidding me? We were just talking about how good you look in that dress because you have hips.’ I think for us, it’s to our advantage. It’s like curves are a good thing. Like it’s not necessarily a horror.”



Deconstructing Body Paradoxes

Group 6:

- Participant 1: *“I think what we Latinas don’t realize is that you can be curvy and be thick and full versus just being curvy because you’re overweight or gaining weight...”*
- Participant 2: *“Yeah, it’s actually two-fold. Like you were saying, I think it has to do with your body type, frame, or structure. Not everyone is going to look good as a size five. If you’re happy and healthy on fifteen or sixteen and that’s how you do it, because you’re that and it’s great. And you know, it runs through the spectrum. And what you were saying about just like the image: I put on over 8 pounds over Thanksgiving and Christmas. I had to go to L.A. for business and was at restaurants every day, and all of that, and I’m like, “Oh, I need to lose these extra pounds. ‘But don’t lose the butt! Just don’t lose the butt!’” And then I’m like: ‘Oh, I started losing weight.’ And I’m like, ‘Good! Good! Okay!’ But it’s true. It’s not even just the women, the men are like that too.”*

Deconstructing the Mainstream Body Market

- **Participant, group 6:** *I think it's hard because we're in competition. And I think there are more women out there competing. Women are more competitive.*
- **Moderator:** *Regardless of race and ethnicity?*
- **Participant:** *Yeah, regardless of race and ethnicity. Especially, like in Washington Heights in the summer. I'm competing and there's like thousands of thin women, you know. And it's crazy.*
- **Moderator:** *So you're making comparisons. You're comparing yourself to others in terms of how they look?*
- **Participant:** *I think there's more women out there than men. So that's why I say there's more competition.*

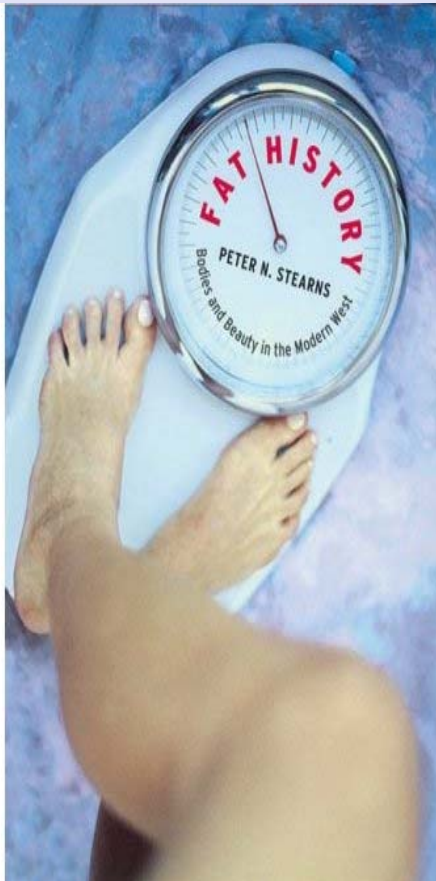
Deconstructing Body Paradoxes

Social and Romantic Dimensions

- **Participant, Group 5:** *“We control ourselves to look better for them (men), I think. I’ll just say quickly that I’m small and I get more attention from White men and if I’m thicker I get more attention form Latino darker men. So it’s like... Well, do I want to be with a White man now or do I want to be with a Latino? When I stopped growing, and I stopped growing at 5’4”, I reached 181 pounds and I was much much thicker and it was like: Oh! The guys used to love it! I mean the Latino darker males. I have dated Asian males, but I find that the White males like me to be small and I seem to attract more (of them) if I’m really skinny. I do find a difference in the way I’m treated and it’s like with whoever I end up with, I have to kind of think: ‘Okay, how do the need me and what they’re attracted to, and how can I perpetuate that?’ So, if I met you in a much heavier state and you seemed to like that, then I try to be that for you...”*

Dual Triggers:

Slim Mainstream Norms + Weight Changes



Non-physically active women, particularly mentioned the impact of post-migratory experiences in their gaining weight associated with negative life styles (e.g., working long hours, having no access to parks, and dealing with high levels of stress) along with the downside aspects of acculturation.

Many participants reported changes in dietary habits once they migrated to the US (e.g., eating more fried foods and less fruit), having sedentary life styles (e.g., using mass transportation instead of walking, watching TV), and lack of physical activity.

MAIN FINDINGS



- ❑ Health and beauty embedded in a Conflicting relationship
- ❑ Body and Age: Inverse relationship:
 - Younger women stress *“looking good”*
 - Older women stress *“being healthy”*
- ❑ Social Pressure to be thin and beautiful along with a general acknowledgment of Latinas’ alternative body types

Findings

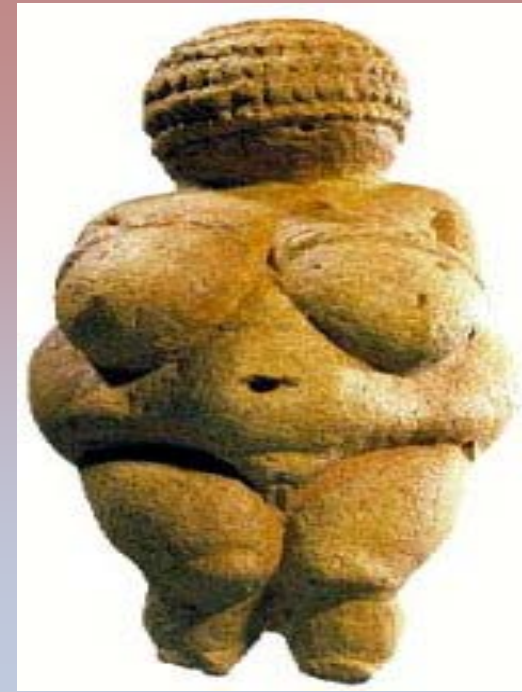


- Participants from both samples (physically and non-physically active) present a body image paradox, expressed as a contradictory interpretative framework regarding body image.
- Most participants acknowledged the influence of mainstream stereotypes that portray the fit/thin woman as synonymous with the Caucasian body type, but also introduced the “Latina” curvy shape as a counter-image to which they subscribe.

Shifting Paradigms...

Through History

- Overall perception that mainstream culture is slowly giving room to other body types as an increasing social acknowledgment of Americans' diversity
- Examples: Mexican food is now mainstream, curvy women are now TV and movie celebrities



Food for thought: Latinas' paradoxical thinking regarding body shape and weight, may be a constructive reflection of the media and cultural changes currently taking place in the US

Changing Body Cultures



In spite of the recognition of the changes in mainstream body paradigms (growing presence of Latina/Black media icons, alternative messages, e.g., Dove commercial) women still consider that being THIN is the mainstream norm to which most women (Latinas and non-Latinas) have to comply with.

Conclusions

Body paradoxes are reflected in participants' struggles to keep a desired body weight and in their mixed feelings regarding their current and ideal body weight and shape.



IMPLICATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Health messages should challenge a uniform model of womanhood, which may have a negative impact on Latinas' efforts to control weight.
- The promotion of more realistic body types that are in tune with women's differences may be more effective in targeting non-physically active Latino women in the US.



Promote Health Interventions that Focus On...

- The differences between being “curvy” and “overweight/fat” to address Latinas’ unhealthy habits.



- Counteracting post-migration’s pernicious effect both related to Latinas’ physical and mental health (depression)

Acknowledgements



This project was funded in part by the PSC-CUNY grant No 68747-00 37 and the PSC- CUNY grant No 68770-00 37 and by the Russo Gift. I want to thank my IAHI research team, as well as the Latina participants whose generous donation of time made this project possible.

Immigration and Health Initiative (IAHI)

Hunter College, School of Health Sciences, The City University of New York 425 East 25th Street, New York, NY 10010

about us

- » The team
- » Acknowledgements
- » Positions available
- » Contact us

programs & projects

- » Immigration Health and Obesity
- » Immigration and Alternative Healing
- » Ethnic Return Migration

published articles

- » Neither Virgins Nor Whores
- » Performing The Tango's Dual Life: Immigrant Tales From The Field
- » Building Bridges Between Adult Education, Public Schools, And Health Care
- » Viladrich's Ethnography
- » Tango Immigrants in New York City

In the news

- » AAA Newsletter
- » Proliferan botánicas in Nueva York
- » With no insurance and cultural mistrust, Latinos seek healthcare in botánicas

events

- » SANA Conference 2006
- » Mental Health Conference
- » Symposium on Immigration and Alternative Healing Systems
- » Alternative Healing Revisited
- » Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Immigration and Health

photos and videos

- » SANA Conference 2006
- » Mental Health Conference
- » Photos of Botanicas
- » Photos: Immigration Alternative Healing Systems Symposium Nov 3rd, 2005
- » Slide Show Nov 3rd 2005

related links

- » Hunter College Home Page
- » Urban Public Health Programs
- » Chinese American Health Project

Welcome to the Immigration and Health Initiative's new website!

We are a group of professionals, scholars and students committed to research, training and advocacy on the health issues affecting immigrant populations worldwide, and particularly in the US. Our specific aims include the following:

- Development of a teaching curricula on immigration and health
- Creation of a research and training area on immigration and health
- Development of partnerships with academic centers and community organizations
- Creation of a Hunter/CUNY Working Group
- Dissemination efforts

enter email address

Subscribe to our newsletter



02/05/2009 | Permalink

Immigration and Health Initiative

<http://www.immigrationandhealthinitiative.org>

Anahí Viladrich PhD

E-mail: aviladri@hunter.cuny.edu

Telephone: (212) 481-4439

Urban Public Health Program

Hunter College of the City University of New York