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Masculinity, Competence, and Health: The Influence of Weight and Race on Social Perceptions of Men

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Abstract

Like other visible characteristics such as skin color, gender, or age, body size is a diffuse status characteristic that impacts perceptions, interactions, and social outcomes. Studies demonstrate that individuals hold preconceived notions about what it means to be fat and document a long list of negative stereotypes associated with fat individuals, including laziness, unintelligence, and incompetence. Such perceptions have consequences for employment, including decisions about hiring, promotion, compensation, and dismissal. In this article, we examine how body size and race interact to affect individuals' perceptions of success, competence, health, laziness, and masculinity. Based on undergraduate students' ratings of photographs of men, our findings demonstrate significant differences between evaluations of black and white men based on body size. Thin white men are perceived to be more intelligent, more successful, and more competent than their thin black counterparts. However, these results reverse when the men are overweight: overweight black men are seen as more intelligent and more competent than overweight white men. They are also seen as more successful

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and hardworking and more masculine. These results suggest that the stigma of body size differently impacts black and white men; individuals judge overweight white men more negatively than overweight black men. We discuss two possible explanations for these findings: black threat neutralization and race-based attribution theory.

Keywords
race, weight, masculinity, fat, obesity stereotypes

Visible characteristics such as skin color, gender, and body size are diffuse status characteristics that shape performance expectations (Berger et al. 1977; Correll and Ridgeway 2003). Unlike specific status characteristics, such as medical expertise, that come with cultural expectations for competence in a narrowly defined range of tasks, diffuse status characteristics like race and gender carry general expectations for competence and affect expectations across a range of settings. Diffuse status characteristics thus have the potential to preemptively influence myriad social exchanges. For example, a large body of literature on race and gender shows how race and gender impact people's expectations (e.g., Bertrand and Mullainathan 2003; Dozier 2005; Pager 2007; Ridgeway 2001).

In recent years, perhaps due to the moral panic surrounding the so-called obesity epidemic (see Campos et al. 2006), scholars have begun to pay specific attention to body size (and, in general, beauty) as a status characteristic (Webster and Driskell 1983). Studies demonstrate that individuals hold preconceived notions about what it means to be fat. Indeed, researchers have found a long list of negative stereotypes associated with fat individuals, including laziness, incompetence, and lack of self-discipline (for a comprehensive overview on weight bias, stereotyping, and stigma, see Brownell et al. 2005).

Status characteristics are important because individuals' expectations or perceptions about others can potentially impact social outcomes. In the case of body size, there are consequences for an array of social outcomes such as educational attainment, marriage prospects, and employment outlook. For example, studies show that "obese" women experience a reduction in wages, family incomes, and the probability of marriage (Conley and Glauber 2007). They also show that obese girls are less likely to enter college after high school compared to their nonobese counterparts (Crosnoe 2007). Recent reviews point not only to negative perceptions of fat, but widespread discrimination in various venues including employment, health care, and educational settings (e.g., Puhl and Heuer 2009).

Perceptions are also important because, as the identity literature points out, it can shape who we are and how we feel about ourselves. For example, a recent study of stigma exit found that others' perceptions are critical in the formation of a stable post-stigma self (Granberg 2011). Studies suggest too that, for women, others' body

perceptions can affect one's self-esteem and body image (see Crocker and Garcia 2005 and Puhl 2005 for discussions of weight-related evaluations and body image). There is also a growing body of literature on men's body image (e.g., Cafri and Thompson 2004; Galli and Reel 2009). This literature not only suggests that men are becoming more body conscious (for an overview, see Grogan 2007), but that others' perception of them shape body satisfaction and self-esteem (Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia 2000; Slevin and Linneman 2010).

Various factors influence the expectations associated with particular status characteristics. These perceptions can be informed, for instance, by previous interactions, social institutions (such as religion, family, and sports), and/or one's social location. One key factor in shaping understandings of salient status characteristics such as race, gender, and body is mass media. For example, researchers have shown that media depictions of African American men still work with derogatory stereotypes such as criminal, thug, and gangster. As Russell-Brown (2009, 14) writes, "[t]hough the media representations of African Americans have grown more diverse, Blacks are still the face of crime in America." Similarly, in her analysis of prime-time television depiction of minorities, Monk-Turner and her colleagues (2010) report that despite more diverse and progressive depictions of minorities, black and Latino characters were significantly more likely to be shown as being less intelligent compared to whites.

In a similar manner, mass media narrowly depict women, often reinforcing traditional gender codes. Collins' (2011) recent commentary summarizes well the current themes in the research literature. As she underscores, empirical studies indicate that media continue to present women in a circumscribed and negative manner; they are sexualized, subordinated, and shown in traditionally feminine and stereotypical roles such as homemakers, wives, and sexual gatekeepers.

Body scholars also point out that the media typically present only physically attractive individuals. This is particularly the case with women, for whom being young and thin appear to be requisite (Bordo 2003; Wolf 1991). Scholars have documented how fat women in particular are made invisible. For example, Giovanelli and Ostertag's (2009) research on media depictions of fat women find that they are symbolically annihilated, both quantitatively and qualitatively: quantitatively in that they make up only 1.7 percent of prime-time viewing hours, and qualitatively because the fat female characters that do appear are often romantically ignored or treated as sexually unappealing. On the other hand, research with men finds that media depict a larger range of body shapes and sizes (Schooler and Ward 2006). As Schooler and Ward (2006, 37) write, "the prevalence of larger male lead characters may provide men with the opportunity for positive comparisons and may further make body shape a less salient dimension for comparison."

Given the importance of perceptions, our study examines how individuals perceive black and white men when body size varies. We focus primarily on men because current related studies focus primarily on women, likely because of the close connection between body norms and ideals of femininity (see McKinley 1999), and because masculinity (or the value of men more generally) is more often

tied to what men *do* rather than how they look. Extant research examining men also tends to examine the differences between men and women, often underscoring how beauty hierarchies work to disadvantage women, often times more so than men (e.g., Pagan and Davila 1997). This narrow focus has meant that intragroup differences among different categories of men have been overlooked.

Studying men's bodies is especially important because we know that the body plays a key role in our ideas about masculinity, in terms of both how masculine we perceive a man to be and how masculine a man perceives himself to be (Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia 2000; Slevin and Linneman 2010). As Slevin and Linneman (2010, 483) write, " . . . Notions of masculinity are embodied: The body plays a critical role in how men understand and practice what it means to be a man." As such, we ask, (How) do variations in body size alter individuals' perceptions of black and white men? An intersectional analysis enables us to flesh out the nuances of these perceptions; while the literature suggests blanket stereotypes of, say, black men, a closer look at how individuals perceive thin black men versus overweight black men may point to variation in intraracial group expectations.

Perceptions of the Fat Body

Sociologists Webster and Driskell (1983, 162) argue that appearance "is one of the most accessible features of a person and acts as readily available status information in most encounters." And research shows that individuals do act on such information and make status judgments (Crandall and Biernat 1990; Maddox, Back, and Liederman 1968). Studies demonstrate that individuals, including teachers, employers, medical professionals, and even parents, hold negative, preconceived notions about what it means to be fat (e.g., Crandall 1995; Puhl et al. 2008). Below, we discuss perceptions of fat people as they relate to three groups of characteristics: success and competence, health and laziness, and gender, particularly masculinity. While the pairing of success and competence seems self-evident, we pair health and laziness because, as others have discussed, health outcomes closely connect with assumptions about work ethic, individual achievement, and moral fortitude (e.g., Edgley and Brisset 1990; Bordo 2003). In western discourses of individualism, perceptions of negative health outcomes (and related decisions about diet and physical activity) come hand in hand with perceptions of laziness, however, unfounded. Indeed, critical obesity studies scholars, fat studies scholars, and fat acceptance activists (e.g., Gard and Wright 2005; Murray 2008; Wann 1988) have all attempted to debunk such myths and to challenge cultural stereotypes associated with the fat body.

Perceptions of Success and Competence

In a multitude of settings, from romantic relationships, to the workplace, to sports and athletics, a great deal of research demonstrates that fat people are often perceived to be less competent and less successful than their thin counterparts.

In an experimental design over thirty years ago, Larkin and Pines (1979) found that potential employers evaluated overweight job candidates significantly more negatively than thin applicants on every factor related to successful job performance. The overweight applicants were seen as less productive, less ambitious, less disciplined, and less determined, thus not recommended for hire. Subsequent studies have also documented the salience of weight in employer evaluations and hiring decisions (see, e.g., Pingitore et al. 1994; Polinko and Popovich 2001).

Once on the job, overweight and obese workers continue to be viewed as less competent, less disciplined, less hardworking, and less intelligent (Fikkan and Rothblum 2005; Paul and Townsend 1995). Such perceptions often translate into tangible inequalities such as lower wages, fewer promotions, more disciplinary treatment, and termination (Brink 1988; Fikkan and Rothblum 2005; Kwan and Trautner 2009).

Yet, it is not only employers who view fat people as incompetent and unsuccessful. For example, a 2002 study of dietitians' attitudes revealed that perceptions were significantly related to weight, with obese people perceived as less successful workers. They also believed that obese people were less likely to find someone willing to marry them (Harvey et al. 2002).

College students also perceive overweight and obese people to be less successful in romantic relationships. A 2005 study asked college students to rate potential romantic partners, and they expressed strong aversion to overweight and obese people. Compared to potential partners described as armless, in a wheelchair, mentally ill, healthy, or with a history of sexually transmitted diseases, obese partners were the least preferred (Chen and Brown 2005). College students also perceive obese individuals to be sexually unskilled and unresponsive (Tiggermann and Rothblum 1988).

Children likewise hold stereotypes of overweight and obese people that mark them as less capable, competent, and successful. Recent research shows that children of age five to eight are less likely to view overweight children as having many athletic, academic, artistic, or social abilities (Penny and Haddock 2010). Other studies also find significant antifat biases among children (see, e.g., Cramer and Steinwert 1998; Davison and Birch 2004).

Perceptions of Health and Laziness

Studies demonstrate that overweight and obese people are perceived to be less healthy and more lazy than thin people. A great deal of this research examines attitudes and perceptions of health professionals toward their overweight and obese patients, though these attitudes are not limited to people in the health industries (see, e.g., Puhl and Heuer 2009; Tiggermann and Rothblum 1988).

Studies consistently find that a significant proportion of health industry workers perceive overweight and obese individuals to be unhealthy, lazy, and less pleasant to treat than nonoverweight individuals. For example, several studies of primary care

physicians find that they characterize their obese patients as lazy, noncompliant, weak-willed, and undisciplined (Bocquier et al. 2005; Foster et al. 2003; Price et al. 1987; Teachman and Brownell 2001).

Other studies find that physicians rate their heavier patients as unhealthy (Hebl and Xu 2001; Teachman and Brownell 2001; see also Puhl and Heuer 2009). For example, Hebl and Xu (2001) found a direct relationship between size and health, such that increasing size of patients led to increased perceptions of unhealthiness. They also found that physicians disliked treating fat patients, finding them to be more "annoying" than nonoverweight patients.

Other health professionals also rate overweight and obese patients as unhealthy and/or lazy, including dietitians (Berryman et al. 2006; Harvey et al. 2002), nurses (Brown 2006), medical students (Wear et al. 2006), exercise science students (Chambliss, Finley, and Blair 2004), and dentists and dental students (Magliocca et al. 2005).

Perceptions of Masculinity

A small but growing literature examines how weight affects people's perceptions of masculinity. Men's bodies have long thought to be related to their character, with taller and more muscular bodies as signifiers of more masculine personality characteristics (Montemayor 1978; Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia 2000; Sheldon 1940). The relationship between masculinity and muscularity is in fact so strong that any other body type, including overweight and obesity, is seen as feminine (Montemayor 1978).

An early study (Biller and Liebman 1971) found that teachers rate muscular boys as more active, energetic, socially competent, and masculine than thin or fat boys (who were rated to be the least masculine of all). Other classic studies have found that muscular men and boys are perceived to be the best leaders and are rated as more popular, more aggressive, and more athletic (e.g., Lerner 1969).

Contemporary scholars have examined the link between weight and masculinity. In an analysis of media portrayals of overweight men, Mosher (2001) shows how fatness is equated with femininity for men. Characters such as Ralph Kramden and Archie Bunker, he argues, are symbols of downward mobility, and equate fatness with impotency and loss of social, financial, and patriarchal power. McPhail (2009) also shows how fatness is linked to what she calls a "crisis of masculinity." Likewise, both Forth (2009) and Bell and McNaughton (2007) trace the historical relationship between fatness and gender and consider how fatness is experienced as feminizing to many men, as softness and roundness defy masculine norms of muscularity, strength, and power. Of note, this body of research tends to equate, rather uncritically, femininity with downward social mobility. So while fat may disrupt the maintenance of normative masculine identities, it can also inadvertently reinforce gender binaries, by equating femininity with negative social traits and outcomes.

Variations by Race and Ethnicity

Few researchers have examined perceptions of race and the fat body, even though the idea that norms about bodies and appearance vary by race and ethnicity is well established (Carr and Friedman 2005; Crandall and Martinez 1996). A handful of studies examine how whites compared to African Americans evaluate fat bodies. For example, Latner, Stunkard, and Wilson (2005) find that compared to white men, white women, and black men, African American women are the most likely to be accepting of obese people, regardless of their own body size. Others have examined differences in whites' and African Americans' self-image and internalization of media messages about thinness and beauty. Overwhelmingly, researchers find that blacks are less likely to identify with white media ideals, have fewer eating disorders than whites, and that black women of all ages have lower levels of weight dissatisfaction than white women (see, e.g., Collins 1991; Hebl, King, and Perkins 2009; Hesse-Biber et al. 2004; Wadden et al. 1984). Others have examined the extent to which reports of discriminatory experiences vary by race. For example, Carr and Friedman (2005) find that African Americans are more likely to report interpersonal and institutional discriminatory treatment on the basis of weight than are whites. Very little of this research on racial and ethnic differences has focused on men (but see Ricciardelli et al. 2007).

In contrast to such studies, Hebl and Heatherton (1998) examined the perceptions of black and white women of various body sizes. In their study, they asked their sample of forty-seven black and white women to rate magazine photographs of thin, average, and overweight black and white women on six characteristics: attractiveness, intelligence, job success, happiness, relationship success, and popularity. They found that that while overweight women were rated most negatively compared to average and thin women, overweight white women were stigmatized much more severely than were overweight black women. In fact, overweight black women outscored overweight white women on all six perceptual characterizations in the study: overweight black women were rated, by both black and white women, as more intelligent, more attractive, more happy, more popular, and more successful in their jobs and relationships than overweight white women. While Hebl and Heatherton do not test mechanisms related to differences in ratings, they speculate they might be related to in-group favoritism on the part of black participants, white participants trying to exhibit political correctness, more media exposure to larger black women than larger white women, or some other unknown bias. A later study by Hebl and Turchin (2005) found that, similar to the study of women, large black men are stigmatized less than large white men.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate a great deal of racial and ethnic variation in terms of how weight affects perceptions of self and others. Bell and McNaughton (2007) and Gross (2005), for example, argue that fatness is not uniformly feminizing among men, as size is sometimes equated with power and hypermasculinity, as in black rap culture. As Hebl and Heatherton (1998) say in

reference to women, ''being large is a very different condition for Black women than for White women'' (p. 424). In this article, we propose that the same holds for black and white men.

Method and Data

To address our research questions, we administered a fifteen-minute survey to undergraduate students at a large state university. The survey asked participants to rate photographs of black men and white men, half of whom appeared to be overweight, and half of whom did not. We found these photos using web image searches on free photo-sharing sites such as flickr.com. We selected eight photos that featured men from the chest-up, facing the camera. The face and chest show numerous signifiers of the thin and overweight body, so even though we intentionally excluded the most stigmatized aspects of fat embodiment (e.g., the stomach, thighs, etc.), we are confident that students used the body as part of their judgments of the photographs. In fact, there appeared to be little confusion on students' part about which men appeared thin and which appeared overweight: their ratings of body size in the survey aligned with each other's ratings, with our own, and with a group of students not in our sample. Moreover, some have argued that the face ''is an instrument of communication'' (Black 2011, 4), that the face in particular ''is a reflection of the self'' (Featherstone 2010, 195). In other words, personality characteristics are most often judged through the face (see Little and Perrett 2007, for a review).

All the men were smiling with teeth showing, and none wore glasses. Using photo imaging software, we ensured that all the men wore neutral-colored clothing, for example, gray or black, and were placed in front of neutral gray backgrounds. All the photographs were of high resolution, and similar in quality and size. Our photographs included two overweight-appearing white men, two overweight-appearing black men, two apparently thin white men, and two apparently thin black men. We selected black men with neither very fair skin tone nor very dark skin tone. In addition, none of the men we selected appeared to be extremely attractive or extremely unattractive, as our goal was to have students make judgments of ''everyday'' people. We pretested the selection of photos with a group of students (not included in our sample) who assessed attractiveness and body size; these assessments were in agreement with our own. Sample participants ranked thin men as higher on attractiveness levels than overweight men; this was evident both for black men and for white men.

In two undergraduate classrooms, using PowerPoint slides and autotiming, we showed each photograph for eleven seconds followed by a black screen. Participants were asked to indicate their ''immediate response'' to the photograph and to not ''overthink'' their ratings. We administered a survey that included a series of seven-point semantic differential scales. Semantic differential scales employ adjectives that are polar opposites to gauge attitudes toward a person or object (see Snider and Osgood 1969). Specifically, we provided seventeen word pairs to evaluate each

man. We present the results of seven of these pairs here: follower–leader, competent–incompetent, unhealthy–healthy, lazy–hardworking, intelligent–unintelligent, successful–unsuccessful, and feminine–masculine. We recoded all responses so that the "positive" adjective was coded 7, and the "negative" adjective coded 1.[1] So, for example, a code of 7 on the competency scale indicates that the rater thought the man depicted was very competent, compared to a 1, which would indicate very incompetent.

We also collected participants' demographic information. Of the 125 students who participated in the photograph evaluation exercise, 2 (1.6 percent) did not provide information about race, 93 (74.4 percent) identified as white, 10 (8.0 percent) as black, 7 (5.6 percent) as Hispanic, 5 (4.0 percent) as Asian, and 7 (5.6 percent) as mixed, and 1 (0.8 percent) as other. Our sample consisted of thirty-six (28.8 percent) men, eighty-seven (69.6 percent) women, and two (1.6 percent) individuals who did not identify their sex. Students ranged in age from eighteen to forty-seven, with an average age of about twenty-two years. The majority of the participants identified themselves as heterosexual (114 or 91.2 percent). Eight (6.4 percent) identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender and one (0.8 percent) identified as "other." Two (1.6 percent) students did not respond to the sexual orientation question. We also asked participants to rate their body size on a seven-point scale where 1 represented thin and 7 represented fat. The mean of 3.27 (just slightly below the midpoint of 4) suggests that participants saw themselves, as a whole, as average sized.

To assess how individuals perceived the men depicted in the photographs, we calculated each participant's average response to overweight white men, overweight black men, thin white men, and thin black men, and performed means comparison tests. We used the Wilcoxon signed-rank sum test, a nonparametric version of a paired samples *t*-test. This is a statistical technique commonly used to compare two population means when populations are not assumed to be normally distributed and data are measured at an interval, rather than ordinal, level.[2]

Results and Discussion

Perceptions of Thin Black and White Men

How did respondents rate black and white men of thin body size? Table 1 presents the means ($\bar{x}$), standard deviations (σ), and *z*-scores for seven variables: intelligence, competence, success, leadership, health, laziness, and masculinity. Table 1 suggests that white men have three distinct advantages over black men: they are seen as more intelligent, more competent, and more successful (which, although not statistically significant, is in the expected direction). Black men, in contrast, are seen as more masculine than white men, more healthy, and more of a leader. Although blacks are seen as lazier than whites, this difference is not significant.

In our racially hierarchical society with a dark history of its treatment of racial minorities, it is not surprising that respondents think of white men as more intelligent

Table 1. Perceptions of Thin Black and White Men.

	White		Black		
Variables	$\bar{x}$	σ	$\bar{x}$	σ	*Z*-score
Unintelligent–intelligent	5.10	.93	4.76	1.01	3.31***
Incompetent–competent	5.16	.94	4.92	1.01	2.52**
Unsuccessful–successful	5.07	.89	4.97	.97	1.58
Follower–leader	3.96	1.11	4.82	1.05	5.96***
Unhealthy–healthy	5.37	.91	5.78	.89	−3.76***
Lazy–hardworking	4.88	.95	4.74	1.15	1.201
Feminine–masculine	5.48	.94	6.13	.74	−6.82***

Note: Prob > |z| *.05; **.01; ***.001.

and more competent. The claim that blacks and other minority racial groups are inherently less intelligent has justified oppressive social policies from slavery to eugenics (see Gossett 1997). With the development of intelligence tests came scientific racism and pseudoscientific claims to support a natural hierarchy among the races (see Gould 1981). Controversial books such as Herrnstein and Murray's (1994) *The Bell Curve* continue to fuel heated debates over intelligence and race, while media stereotypes that depict blacks as less intelligent and as threatening criminals continue to feed perceptions of natural racial differences (Monk-Turner et al. 2010; Russell-Brown 2009).

The data also show that thin black men are perceived as significantly more masculine than thin white men. This result can be understood in light of cultural gender ideologies. Hegemonic masculinity prescribes that men adopt a narrow array of behavioral norms including exclusive heterosexuality, emotional stoicism, risk-taking behavior, aggression, and independence (Connell 1995). "Real" men are masculine and embody these norms; those who stray are sanctioned and put into place (Kivel 2010 [1984]). However, norms about hegemonic masculinity are not homogeneous; for example, they intersect with racial, ethnic, and subcultural norms. For example, researchers have written about how norms of masculinity take a particular form for disenfranchised black men who must respect a masculine "code of the street" (Anderson 1999) or display a "cool pose" (Majors and Billson 1992). Empirical tests suggest that African American men are more likely than white men to adopt hegemonic masculinity norms (Levant and Majors 1997), although others have found that geographic region of residence may be an intervening variable in explaining racial differences in the adoption of traditional masculine ideology (Levant, Majors, and Kelley 1998). That there is some evidence that African American men are more likely to endorse and exhibit characteristics of hegemonic masculinity may in turn account for the findings that African American men are perceived as more masculine. Furthermore, like perceptions of intelligence and competence, media stereotypes of the criminal black man (Russell-Brown 2009) may also propagate and reinforce these perceptions.

The finding that respondents perceive black men as more of a leader than white men, and that this difference is statistically significant, is somewhat unexpected, given the history of slavery and race relations in the United States. It is plausible that leadership, itself a masculine characteristic, in what some perceive as an increasingly even playing field, now tips in favor of black men. The perception of black men as more of a leader than white men may also point to a shift in how we think of leadership. For example, changes in the cultural, political, and economic landscape may mean that individuals are more exposed than ever to black men who are in leadership positions. For example, we have a black president and we also see blacks setting trends in journalism, politics, music, fashion, and sports. This new social landscape may also explain the absence of a statistical racial difference in evaluations of work ethic (lazy–hardworking scale) and success (unsuccessful–successful scale). For example, it is possible that with visible black men in power, individuals perceive that racial discrimination is minimal or absent. As such they are likely to perceive that blacks are as likely as whites to be successful or hardworking—variables that are often seen as controllable unlike, say, intelligence with which genetic inheritance arguments are still associated.

Finally, the tendency to think of blacks, specifically black men, as athletic may account in part for the finding that thin black men are considered healthier compared to thin white men. Media images of African American male athletes are widespread, perpetuating in part the myth that certain races exhibit (or lack) certain natural abilities. As Brooks (2009) points out, such sociobiological arguments persist despite no evidence for scientific validation of a racial gene or natural superior ability among certain racial groups. His aptly titled book *Black Men Can't Shoot* attempts to debunk the myth that despite widespread images intimating that blacks are athletically gifted, athletic ability requires hard work and dedication. Even so, these ubiquitous images and cultural discourses of black males as natural athletes may partly account for the finding that black men are rated as healthier than their white counterparts.

Perceptions of Overweight Black and White Men

But what happens when we are not just examining thin bodies? How do these results change when the men in question are overweight? Do we still perceive white men to be more intelligent and competent? Do black men still hold an advantage in terms of health, masculinity, and leadership?

Table 2 presents our results for overweight black and white men. We see in this table that every perceptual advantage goes to black men rather than white men, a finding that is consistent with Hebl and Turchin's (2005) research with a group of college students that found that large black men are stigmatized less than large white men. Moreover, these differences are statistically significant. Whereas white thin men are seen as more intelligent and more competent than blacks, these results *reverse* when the men are overweight: now *black* men are seen as more intelligent

Table 2. Perceptions of Overweight Black and White Men.

	White		Black		
Variables	$\bar{x}$	σ	$\bar{x}$	σ	*Z*-score
Unintelligent–intelligent	4.78	.87	5.13	1.01	−3.26***
Incompetent–competent	4.92	.99	5.23	.86	−3.08**
Unsuccessful–successful	4.47	.88	5.11	.82	−5.55***
Follower–leader	3.75	.97	5.07	1.03	7.69***
Unhealthy–healthy	2.50	.91	4.15	1.31	−8.87***
Lazy–hardworking	3.56	1.06	4.74	1.15	−7.38***
Feminine–masculine	5.56	.91	5.96	.78	−5.00***

Note: Prob > |z| *.05; **.01; ***.001.

and more competent. They are also seen as more successful and hardworking. And just like thin black men, respondents continue to perceive overweight black men to be more of a leader, as more masculine, and as more healthy compared to whites.

Two theoretical pathways help shed light on these findings. On one hand, what we observe may be a result of seeing black men who are overweight as less stereotypical than their thin counterparts. That is, perhaps respondents indicate more favorable views of overweight black men compared to both thin black men and thin white men because they are seen as less threatening. (Notably, there is an exception for both health and masculinity, i.e., overweight black men are seen as unhealthier and less masculine.) For example, long-standing research points to a criminal black man stereotype (Lester and Ross 2003; Russell-Brown 2009), one that assumes a mesomorphic body type. Yet the overweight black man challenges, even neutralizes, our association of black men with thugs, rapists, gangsters, and criminals. Just as scholars have identified stereotypes of fat people as nonthreatening, for example, funny, sociable, and so on (see Cordell and Ronai 1999; Degher and Huges 1999), it is plausible that a similar stereotype is activated: overweight black men are no longer seen as a threat to the social order and are therefore perceived more favorably. In other words, we see black overweight men as less threatening and thus more likeable. Thus, we account for positive perceptions of overweight black men through a black threat neutralization thesis.

This thesis, however, accounts primarily for the difference between thin black men and overweight black men, and only indirectly accounts for the findings that overweight black men are perceived more favorably than overweight white men. To directly account for these findings, we propose a race-based attribution thesis. As attribution theory informs us, fat people are more likely to be evaluated negatively (DeJong 1980) when they are seen as responsible for their condition. That is, when overweight individuals are seen as personally blameworthy for their condition, they are judged more harshly.

A race-based attribution argument argues that overweight white men experience a greater social penalty for their weight than overweight black men because they are

seen as more personally responsible for their bodies. Specifically, individuals may perceive white men's overweight condition as a result of personal factors, for example, a lack of discipline, self-control, willpower, and so on, whereas they attribute blacks' overweight condition to environmental factors, for example, lack of access to safe neighborhoods to exercise, high access to unhealthy fast foods, and socioeconomic disadvantages that block pathways to achieve better health. These latter factors are perceived as external to the individual and therefore more difficult to control. Notably, research illustrates that rates of overweight and obesity in developing countries are inversely related to socioeconomic status (e.g., Sobal and Stunkard 1989; Wang 2001) and that fast-food restaurants are more prevalent in disadvantaged black neighborhoods (Block, Scribner, and DeSalvo 2004). If this is the case, it is possible that individuals perceive (however inaccurately) white men as a privileged group who are especially responsible for their bodies because they have access to the resources often required to acquire and maintain the conventionally attractive body size. In this sense, white men are seen as particularly blameworthy and face a higher social penalty for their overweight bodies.

No doubt it is possible that the indirect effects of the black threat neutralization thesis work hand in hand with the direct effects of race-based attribution theory, thereby accounting for the wide differences in means and the statistical difference between black and white overweight men.

Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate significant differences between participants' evaluations of black and white men based on body size. Thin white men are perceived to be more intelligent and more competent than their black counterparts. However, these results reverse when the men are overweight: overweight white men are seen as less intelligent and less competent. They are also seen as less successful, less of a leader, less healthy, less hardworking, and less masculine. This suggests that the stigma of body size differently impacts black and white men, with overweight white men judged more negatively than overweight black men. We encourage researchers to pay attention to differences by gender and race, along with other attributes in future studies of obesity and the body.

Of course, we can only speculate about the mechanisms behind our findings that show that individuals do not adopt blanket stereotypes. We forward two possible accounts for these findings—theoretical suppositions that we encourage others to empirically verify. First, we suggest that our respondents' favorable views of overweight black men may be because they see them as less threatening compared to both their thin black and overweight white counterparts. In other words, different stereotypes operate for overweight black men who may lose their stigma of criminality and accompanying threat. Second, it is possible that respondents express more favorable views of overweight black men compared to overweight white men because overweight white men pay a social penalty (more so than overweight black

men) for compromising their privileged position in society. They pay this penalty because they are assumed to have the resources to maintain, at the very least, an average or thin body size. They themselves are seen as responsible for their "deviant" bodies. In contrast, black men are viewed as less culpable and therefore less blameworthy because their condition is attributed to environmental factors beyond their control.

Our study is exploratory. Our relatively small, nonrandom sample presents only a starting point for further understanding. We encourage researchers to not only replicate our findings using digital imaging of photographs but to test our complementary theoretical propositions. We also encourage further research that examines how specific demographics influence these perceptions. Our findings also have implications for the fields of fat studies, men and masculinity, and sociology of the body. While previous research has examined the link between media and men's body image, future research should qualitatively investigate how people assign social characteristics to black and white thin and overweight men, with a particular focus on the role of media in people's judgments.

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Contributions of the first two authors are equal.

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Notes

1. We want to emphasize that we mixed up the ordering of the "positive" and "negative" characteristics in the survey, so that raters were not tempted to simply mark an entire column of adjectives uncritically, nor were all "negative" characteristics implicitly associated with femininity. While binaries are problematic, semantic differential scales that use bipolar adjectives are a helpful way to understand perceptions (see Heise 1969; Snider and Osgood 1969; see Johnson 1980, for an analysis of using semantic differential scales to critically examine underlying values and judgments).
2. Paired difference *t*-tests produced similar results in all of our analyses.

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