

# Complexity of Culture: The Role of Identity and Context in Bicultural Individuals' Body Ideals

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Culture plays an important role in shaping body image, and people from different cultures have different beliefs about what constitutes the “ideal” body type. This study examines the relationship between culture and body ideals in Asian-American and Black-American women. Results from two studies show that subjective cultural identity and situational cultural cues had different relationships with body ideals. Among Asian-American women, identification with Asian culture was related to a thinner body ideal, but exposure to Asian cultural cues (relative to American cultural cues) was related to a thicker body ideal. Among Black-American women, identification with Black culture was related to a thicker body ideal, but exposure to Black cultural cues (relative to American cultural cues) was related to a thinner body ideal. These results have theoretical and practical implications for understanding how internal and external manifestations of culture can differentially influence body image.

**Keywords:** culture, body image, body ideals, bicultural individuals, cultural identification, cultural cues

Body ideals, or idealized forms of body types, are often rooted in cultural values. For example, Black or African-American cultures are more likely to value thick and curvaceous body types (Craig, 2006), whereas Asian cultures value thin and slender bodies (Evans & McConnell, 2003; Jung & Forbes, 2007).<sup>1</sup> Although most studies on cultural differences in body ideals conceptualized culture as people's internal identification with a cultural or ethnic group, recent research suggests that culture can also be activated or accentuated depending on one's external surroundings (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). Drawing on this idea that culture has *both* internal and external components, we examine how different facets of culture relate to body ideals among “bicultural” individuals.

Bicultural has been defined in various ways in literature, including but not limited to “immigrants, refugees, sojourners (e.g., international students, expatriates), indigenous people, ethnic minorities, those in interethnic relationships, and mixed-ethnic individuals” (Nguyen & Benet-Martinez, 2007, p. 102). In one stream of work, Berry (1990; Berry & Sam, 1997) examined immigrants, or people who might identify with and participate in activities related to their home/ethnic culture as well as their host/mainstream culture. Others have examined British-Hong Kong residents or people who live in multicultural societies (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000), people who live and work away from their home countries (Chen, Benet-Martinez, & Bond, 2008; Sanchez-Burks, Lee, Choi, Nisbett, Zhao, & Koo, 2003), or ethnic minorities such as Asian- and Latin Americans (Benet-

Martínez, Lee, & Leu, 2006; Miramontez, Benet-Martinez, & Nguyen, 2008). Even though these streams of biculturalism research examined different samples, they all focused on individuals who are exposed to and proficient in multiple cultures.

Extending the line of work that examined the psychology of biculturalism within ethnic minorities, this study focuses on the body ideals of Asian Americans and African/Black Americans. Both groups have been exposed to an ethnic culture—Asian or Black culture—and a mainstream, American culture. We propose that culture, represented externally in the form of situational cultural cues or internally as cultural identities, may have different effects on Asian Americans' and Black Americans' body ideals.

## Culture and Body Ideals

Ideal standards of body sizes are culturally specific. Since the 1960s, ideal body sizes for American women have emphasized thinness (Fallon, 1990; Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann & Ahrens, 1992). For example, American models, exemplars of idealized bodies, are typically a size 2, much thinner than an average American woman who is typically a size 12–14 (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004; Halliwell, Dittmar, & Howe, 2005). Women who identify highly with being American have been shown to endorse these values of thinness (Devos & Banaji, 2005).

However, a large literature shows that body ideals can vary across different cultural groups. Women in Black and Latin American cultures, for example, perceive bigger, thicker, and more voluptuous figures to be more attractive (Craig, 2006; de Casa-

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<sup>1</sup> When we refer to body ideals as thin or thinner, we are not referring to a specific number (such as weight or figure size). Rather, we are referring to thinness as a continuum. For example, in references to figure sizes in a Figure Rating Scale (see Figure 1), starting from the middle, the figures towards the left side resemble progressively *thinner* (or *more thin*) figures whereas the figures towards the right are progressively *less thin*.

nova, 2004). There is evidence that Black Americans are less likely to endorse the thin ideal (Gluck & Geliebter, 2002). Within the last two decades, Black women models' figure sizes have increased, whereas those of White women models have decreased (Dawson-Andoh, Gray, Soto, & Parker, 2011; Sypeck, Gray, Ahrens, 2004). Because they feel less pressure to be thin, Black women who identify with Black culture tend to have lower levels of body dissatisfaction (Turnage, 2004). In contrast, Asians tend to endorse *extreme* thinness in their body ideals, even more so than White Americans (Evans & McConnell, 2003). Women in harems in ancient Chinese dynasties reported starving themselves to stay thin to win the emperor's favor (Xu, 1994). Consistent with this body ideal of extreme thinness, Asian women had poorer body image compared with their White counterparts even after controlling for weight (Jung & Forbes, 2007; Wildes, Emery & Simons, 2001).

Given that body ideals are culturally determined, bicultural individuals may have complex and dynamic images of their own bodies. Known as "cultural frame switching," bicultural individuals have been found to switch or alternate between their different cultural identities, endorsing different sets of culturally relevant beliefs, attitudes, and values in different contexts (Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee & Morris, 2002; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). This research on cultural frame switching suggests that bicultural individuals may similarly switch back and forth between different body ideals. That is, given that Black Americans are exposed to a thin (mainstream American) and thicker (Black) body ideal, whereas Asian Americans are exposed to a thin (mainstream American) and thinner (Asian) body ideal, they may also switch between these culturally prototypically body ideals. Below, we suggest that internal and external conceptualizations of culture will have differential effects on this cultural frame switching process.

### Internal or Subjective Cultural Identification

Cultural identity refers to the extent to which one's cultural group (Asian, Black, Latino, e.g.) contributes to one's identity or sense of self. When individuals strongly identify with a culture, they are likely to adopt and internalize the norms and the values of that specific culture. They are also more likely to participate in "activities" relevant to that culture, affecting the food they eat, the languages they speak, the types of media they consume, and their social networks (Allen et al., 2008; Berry, 1997).

While cultural identity is often treated as a stable construct—that is, individuals are assumed to identify with a single cultural group, and that their cultural identification is unchanging across situations—this is not necessarily true. As mentioned earlier, bicultural individuals can identify with and participate in *both* their home/ethnic culture and their host/mainstream culture, or identify more or less strongly with different cultural identities depending on the situation (Berry & Sam, 1997; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). Importantly, there is evidence that as one's cultural identification changes, so do body ideals. As mentioned, Black women who identify more with Black culture tend to have lower levels of body dissatisfaction (Turnage, 2004). The reverse is true for Asian Americans, whose ethnic culture endorses a thinner body ideal than mainstream/American culture; Asian Americans who were more acculturated with mainstream/American culture adopted a

less thin' body ideal, whereas those who were more acculturated with ethnic Asian culture reported increased pressure to be thin, greater body dissatisfaction, and poorer body image (Lau, Lum, Chronister & Forrest, 2006; Phan & Tylka, 2006; Sussman, Troung, & Lim, 2007).

Drawing from this research, we suggest that the degree to which bicultural individuals identify with their respective cultural groups will be associated with their body ideals. Specifically, as Asian and Black Americans adopt a stronger mainstream/American cultural identity, they also adopt a more "mainstream/Americanized" body ideal. Given that the mainstream/American body ideal is more thin than the Black body ideal but less thin than the Asian body ideal, we predict that, for Black Americans, a stronger American cultural identity (as opposed to a Black cultural identity) may be related to a thinner body ideal; but for Asian Americans, a stronger American cultural identity (as opposed to an Asian cultural identity) may be related to a thicker body ideal.

### Exposure to Cultural Cues in the External Environment

According to the "dynamic constructivist" model of culture, culture is a schema of related values, norms, attitudes, and knowledge that can be activated by external cultural cues, or situational stimuli that are imbued with cultural meanings (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000). In one of the earlier empirical demonstrations of this idea, Hong and her colleagues exposed Chinese-American bicultural individuals to Chinese icons (including images of the Great Wall of China, the Chinese dragon, Chinese calligraphy, chopsticks, or a Chinese opera singer) or American icons (including images of the American flag, the White House, Abraham Lincoln, Superman, and a cowboy). The study showed that, when exposed to the Chinese cultural cues, bicultural individuals made more situational attributions, a prototypically Eastern way of explaining events and behaviors. However, when exposed to American cultural cues, bicultural individuals made more dispositional attributions, a prototypically Western way of explaining events behaviors (Lee, Hallahan, & Herzog, 1996).

In addition to images, other cultural cues have been shown to induce cultural frame switching. For example, Thai American bicultural individuals have been shown to behave in prototypically Eastern or Western ways depending on the language (Thai vs. English) of the survey instructions (Sanchez-Burks, Choi, Lee, Ybarra, & Nisbett, 2003; Yang & Bond, 1980). Or, Cheng, Lee, and Benet-Martínez (2006) found that culture frame switching can be induced by subtly exposing Chinese-American bicultural individuals to positive and negative stereotypes of Asians (with words such as "parents," "disciplined," "superstition," and "sheltered") or positive and negative stereotypes of Americans (with words such as "sporty" "independent," "lazy," and "boastful").

This research on cultural priming and frame switching suggests that culture is indeed dynamic—depending on the salience of cultural cues in the environment, different cultural values or schemas come to the fore. However, it is important to note that bicultural individuals often exhibit a "contrast effect" where they activate the cultural schema that is *opposite to* or *contrasts with* the dominant cultural cues in the environment. Specifically, under conditions where cultural cues are made highly salient, obvious, or blatant, a contrast effect emerges; for example, Asian American

bicultural individuals may behave in prototypically Asian ways when American cues are made highly salient, and behave in prototypically American ways when Asian cues are made highly salient (Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002; Cheng, Lee, & Benet-Martínez, 2006). Several mechanisms have been proposed to explain this pattern of cultural contrast. Zou, Morris and Benet-Martínez (2008) suggested that contrast effects occur as a result of disidentification motives, or the desire to reject a category that is blatantly imposed by others. The more salient the cultural cues in the situation, the more people overcorrect potentially biasing effects of these cues, leading to behaviors that contradict from the cues (Glaser & Banaji, 1999). Cheng and Lee (2009) proposed that cultural cues that seemed discrepant from one's own cultural experiences (e.g., when bicultural individuals with negative acculturation experiences are exposed to positive cultural cues) are seen as particularly salient and obvious, leading to disassociation and reactance to those cues. Others have suggested that under conditions where external cultural cues are blatant, bicultural individuals may actively suppress cultural schemas that are inconsistent with these cues, and this process of active suppression can lead to overactivation of the unwanted cultural identity. For example, Asian Americans may attempt to suppress their Asian cultural identity in a situation with obvious American cultural cues, yet such a deliberate attempt to suppress their Asian cultural identity ironically makes the identity more highly activated (Cheng, Lee, & Benet-Martínez, 2006; Mok, Cheng, & Morris, 2010).

Drawing on this research, we predict that when bicultural individuals are exposed to salient and obvious cultural cues in the external environment, they will exhibit contrast effects, adopting body ideals that are *opposite* to the culturally specific ideals. Given that the mainstream/American body ideal is less thin than the Asian body ideal but more thin than the Black body ideal, we predict that Asian Americans will adopt a more American (or less thin) body ideal when exposed to Asian rather than American cultural cues, whereas Black Americans will adopt a more American (or more thin) body ideal when exposed to Black rather than American cultural cues.

### Present Studies

In this study, we draw from previous research showing that cultures differ in their perceptions of body ideals—with Black, American, and Asian cultures each having different body ideals. To examine the impact of culture on body ideals, we focused on bicultural Asian Americans and Black Americans, people who have been exposed to two cultural groups with different body ideals. We suggest that *cultural identification*—one's internal or subjective representation of the strength of culture in one's sense of self—and *cultural context*—the exposure to salient cultural cues in the external environment—will have opposite effects on body image among these bicultural individuals.

We first predict that cultural identification will be related to body ideals, such that the more strongly one identifies with a cultural group, the more strongly they will adopt the dominant body ideal of the culture. Specifically we hypothesize the following:

*H1a:* Asian-American women who more strongly identify with American culture will have a thicker body ideal.

*H1b:* Asian-American women who more strongly identify with Asian culture will have a thinner body ideal.

*H1c:* Black-American women who more strongly identify with American culture will have a thinner body ideal.

*H1d:* Black-American women who more strongly identify with Black culture will have a thicker body ideal.

Second, we predict that exposure to salient cultural cues in the environment will elicit contrast effects on body ideals. Specifically, we hypothesize the following:

*H2a:* Asian-American women who are presented with a salient American cultural cue will have a thinner body ideal than those presented with salient Asian cultural cue.

*H2b:* Black-American women who are presented with a salient American cultural cue will have a thicker body ideal than those presented with salient Black cultural cue.

We conducted two studies to investigate how internal cultural identification and external cultural cues predict body ideals among bicultural individuals. Study 1 examines this question among Asian-American women, and Study 2 examines this question among Black-American women. We only examine women in our studies in part because body dissatisfaction is more prevalent among women than men, and the majority of previous research on this topic has focused on women (e.g., Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002). We examined Asian-American and Black-American women in two different studies in part because we had to use different methods to recruit participants from each of these samples, and in part because we used different, culturally suitable methods to measure body ideals for each cultural sample.

### Study 1

Study 1 is a quasi-experimental design where cultural identification and body ideals were measured using self-report measures, and cultural cues were experimentally manipulated. Participants responded to an online survey measuring cultural identification and body ideals. Participants were randomly assigned to view either Asian or American cues. The cultural cues were images or icons pretested to represent either Asian or American culture.

### Method

**Participants.** A total of 89 Asian-American women participated in this study (mean age = 20.81 years,  $SD = 2.88$ ). Forty-five were first-generation Asian Americans, or born outside the United States (Subsequent analyses showed that immigration status did not affect the results.) The average number of years lived in the United States was 10.72 ( $SD = 6.96$ ; median = 10). Participants' average body mass index (or BMI, calculated as (weight in pounds\*703)/(height in inches squared)) was 21.28 ( $SD = 3.08$ ). (According to the department of Health and Human Services of the National Institute of Health, the range for "normal" BMI is 18.5–24.9.)

Approximately half the participants were recruited through psychology courses and flyers posted at the campus of a large university

in the Midwest and were awarded partial course credit. The other half were recruited through personal and online networks and were entered into a lottery for a chance to win a gift card. Comparisons of key variables between these two groups of participants yielded no significant differences (all  $p$ s were greater than .05). As such, these two groups were combined in all subsequent analyses.

Participants were included only if they were age 18 or older, female, living in the United States, and self-identified as East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, or Korean) or Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Malaysian, or Cambodian). These criteria were similar to previous studies on bicultural individuals in the United States (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). Analyses were run separately for East Asians and South East Asians, but similar effects were found and thus we only report results of analyses combining both groups.

**Procedure and measures.** Participants were directed to fill out an online survey. After providing informed consent, participants were asked to fill out the following measures, in the order presented.

**Cultural identification.** Following previous studies on cultural priming among Asian-American bicultural individuals in the United States, we used two items to assess participants' identification with American and Asian cultures (Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002; Cheng & Lee, 2009; Cheng, Lee, & Benet-Martínez, 2006). Using a six-point Likert scale with 1 being *very weak* and 6 being *very strong*, participants rated the following items: "Please rate the strength of your cultural identification with North American culture" and "Please rate the strength of your cultural identification with Asian culture." Although longer scales exist in measuring cultural identification, these two items have been shown to correlate highly with these longer measures and have also been shown to predict culturally relevant behaviors including attributional tendencies, cultural ingroup favoritism, self-construals, and relational patterns (Mok, Morris, Benet-Martínez, & Karakitapoglu-Aygun, 2007; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2007).

**Cultural cues.** Participants were then randomly assigned to view a series of either Asian or American cultural cues. To ensure adequate processing of the cultural cues, we asked each participant to indicate their liking of each cue. To generate the cultural cues, we first included images from past studies on cultural priming of Asian-American bicultural individuals (Benet-Martínez, Lee, & Leu, 2006; Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000). These images used in past research were supplemented with images that emerged from In-

ternet searches using the search terms "Asian culture" and "American culture." (Pictures of female bodies as well as food products were excluded). To pretest the cultural content of the images, we asked 40 college students to rate the extent to which each picture represented Asian and American cultures using a five-point Likert scale (with 5 being *very much* and 1 being *not at all*). Pictures that had a high score in the representation of one culture and a low score in the representation of the other were included in the study. For example, a picture of a cowboy was rated 4.74 as representing American culture and 1.3 as representing Asian culture and was thus included as an American cultural cue. A picture of a pair of chopsticks was rated at 4.82 as representing Asian culture and 2.0 as representing American culture. American pictures were rated significantly more American compared with Asian pictures,  $t(39) = 4.2, p < .01$ . Asian pictures were rated significantly more Asian compared with American pictures,  $t(39) = 8.4, p < .1$ .

**Body ideals.** Body ideals were assessed using the figure rating scale (Stunkard, Sorenson & Schulsinger, 1983). Participants viewed nine sketches of women of different sizes, ranging from very thin to very heavy (see Figure 1). Participants were asked to indicate the figure that best represented their ideal body. The thinnest figure had a score of 1, and the biggest/thickest figure had a score of 9.

**Demographics.** Demographic items about age, gender, ethnicity, years living in the United States, height and weight were included.

## Results

Summary of means, standard deviations, and correlations of key variables are provided in Table 1. Similar to previous studies of Asian-American bicultural individuals in the United States, there were no significant differences between strength of identification with American and Asian cultures ( $t = -1.2, ns$ ), but they were negatively correlated with each other ( $r = -.25, p < .05$ ).

**Hypothesis testing.** We ran a simultaneous multiple regression with body ideal (or ideal figure size) as the dependent variable; cultural cues (dummy coded), identification with Asian culture and identification with American culture were entered as predictors; age and BMI were included as covariates. Table 2 presents the results. The overall model was significant,  $F(5, 88) = 3.03, p < .05$ , and explained 16% of the variance in body ideal.

Current BMI was positively associated with ideal body size; when controlling for age, cultural cues, and cultural identification, those with higher BMI endorsed a thicker body ideal. Hypothesis

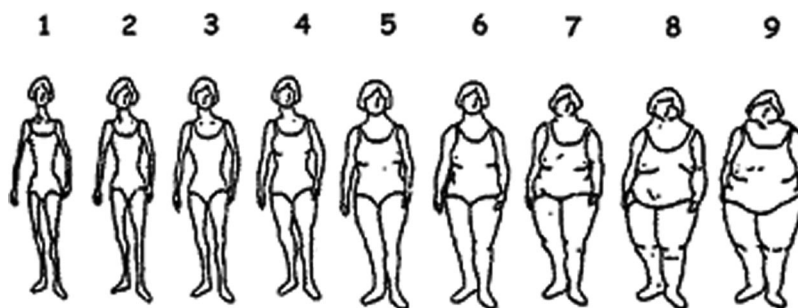


Figure 1. Figure rating scale. From *The Genetics of Neurological and Psychiatric Disorders* (pp. 115-120), by A. Stunkard, T. Sorensen, and F. Schulsinger, 1983, New York: The Raven Press.

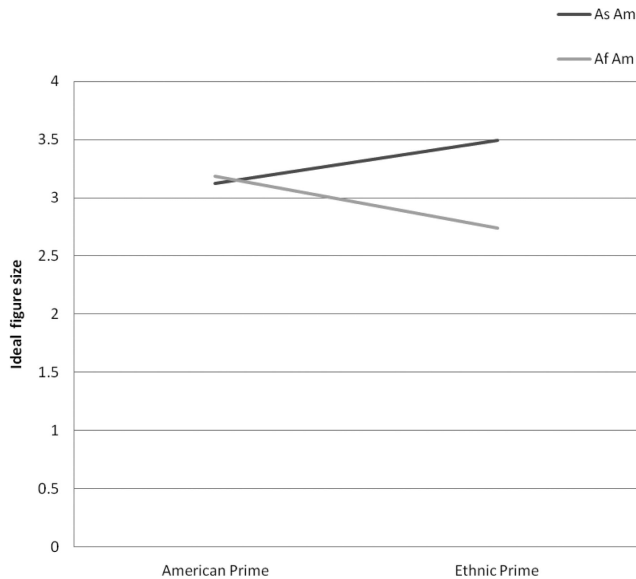


Figure 2. Ethnicity as a moderator of the relationship between cultural prime and ideal figure size.

1a was not supported; identification with American culture was not associated with ideal body size. However, supporting Hypothesis 1b, identification with Asian culture was negatively associated with ideal body size. For every unit increase in identification with Asian culture, there was a .15 unit decrease in ideal figure size. Supporting Hypothesis 2a, those who viewed Asian cultural cues had a .37 unit increase in ideal body size relative to those who were presented with American cues. In short, external cultural cues had the predicted contrast effect on ideal body size. Although we did not hypothesize any interactions between identification and cultural cues, we tested all possible interactions in our models as post hoc analyses, and found no significant effects.<sup>2</sup>

## Discussion

Two key findings emerged from Study 1. First, subjective, internal identification with Asian culture was related to thinner, or more normatively Asian body ideal. This is consistent with previous research showing that higher identification with Asian culture relates to

Table 2

*Simultaneous Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Ideal Body Figure Size for Asian-American Women (n = 89)*

Variable	$R^2 = .15$				
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>sr</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>p</i> <sup>a</sup>
Constant	1.57	1.01			
Age	.01	.03	.02	.00	.42
BMI	.09	.03	.32	.09	.001
American Identification	-.02	.07	-.02	.00	.42
Asian identification	-.15	.09	-.19	.04	.04
American cue <sup>b</sup>	-.37	.18	-.22	.03	.02

<sup>a</sup> *p* value of standardized beta one-tail test. <sup>b</sup> American cues are compared with Asian cues.

higher pressures to be thin, or the more general proposition that standards of body ideals are related to cultural identification (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Turnage, 2004). Second, we found that participants exposed to salient American cultural cues reported thinner body ideals than participants exposed to salient Asian cultural cues. This supports the predicted contrast effect, where exposure to American cultural cues led to thinner, or more normatively Asian body ideals. By using a quasi-experimental approach where participants were randomly assigned to view different cultural cues, we show that cultural cues in the environment have a causal effect on perceptions of body ideal. For bicultural individuals, changes in their cultural environment can bring about fluctuations in their body ideal and possibly their body image and body satisfaction.

Not all our hypotheses were supported, however. Subjective identification with American culture did not relate to body image (Hypothesis 1a). This may be in part a result of more diversity of body sizes in America. Qualitative interviews with Asian-American women have shown that although they perceive Asian body ideals to be uniformly thin, a larger range of acceptable body sizes is perceived to exist among mainstream Americans (Guan, Calloway, Lee, & Reddy, 2011). It is possible that there are weaker relationships between American cultural identification and ideal body size because acceptable norms are relatively less stringent in the United States than in Asia. It is also possible that our single-item measure of identification with American culture was not reliable enough to detect significant relationships between identification and body ideal. Indeed, the interpretation of "North American" culture may be understood differently among participants in this sample. For example, they can interpret this as their identification with White/European culture, or they can interpret this as their identification with a multicultural society that is accepting of multiple body sizes. Another explanation may be the variability of settings participants are under while filling the online survey. As an online survey, we had little control where and when participants complete the survey—some might be filling it out in a more

Table 1  
*Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations of Continuous Measures Among Asian Americans (n = 89)*

Measures	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Ideal figure	—					
2. Age	.10	—				
3. BMI	.28**	.05	—			
4. American identification	.13	-.02	.27**	—		
5. Asian identification	-.16	-.21*	.03	-.25**	—	
6. Generation status (1 = 2nd Gen, 0 = 1st Gen)	.05	-.03	.24**	.40**	-.01	—
Mean	2.91	20.81	21.28	4.26	4.57	.53
Standard deviation	.83	2.88	3.08	1.26	1.04	.04

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

<sup>2</sup> Post hoc analyses found no significant two-way interactions between American identification and Asian identification ( $\beta = .11$ ,  $t = .71$ , *ns*), American identification and cultural cue ( $\beta = .07$ ,  $t = .41$ , *ns*), and Asian identification and cultural cue ( $\beta = -.16$ ,  $t = -1.02$ , *ns*). The three-way interaction between American identification, Asian identification, and cultural cue was also not significant ( $\beta = -.03$ ,  $t = -.17$ , *ns*).

mainstream American setting, but others in a more Asian or ethnic setting. Given our finding that external cultural cues can have contrast effects on body ideals, this might have created a confound. Although comparisons of East Asian and Southeast Asian samples, and of first- and second-generation samples showed no significant differences, there may be more fine grained differences in body ideals between different Asian ethnic and national groups and those of different generational status that are not captured in our survey (Akutsu, Snowden, Organista, 1996; Tsai, Chentsova-Dutton, & Wong, 2002).

To address our hypotheses further, a second study with Black Americans was conducted. Black Americans as a group also differ in their cultural origins and level of identification with Black and mainstream/American cultures, though a larger majority may be born and raised in the United States (Benson, 2006; Landrine & Klonoff, 1994). Further, examining our hypotheses with Black Americans allows us to rule out alternative explanations to Study 1. It can be argued that subjective identification with an ethnic (e.g., Asian) rather than mainstream (e.g., American) culture can contribute to acculturation stress, which in turn lead to adoption of unhealthy and extreme body ideals (Romero, Carvajal, Volle, & Orduña, 2007). To rule out this explanation, it is important that we examine Black culture, a minority culture that endorses a thicker body ideal, and one where identification with one's ethnic (or Black) identity may be related to higher satisfaction with one's body image (Craig, 2006; Gluck & Geliebter, 2002; Evans & McConnell, 2003; Grabe & Hyde, 2006).

## Study 2

Like Asian Americans, Black Americans are bicultural in the sense that they identify with two sets of cultural norms and ideals, Black and mainstream American cultures. Unlike Asian-American bicultural individuals, the body ideal of the ethnic (or Black) culture is thicker than the body ideal of the mainstream (or American) culture. As such, we expect the trends observed in Study 1 will be in the opposite direction in Study 2. For Black-American women, we expect higher levels of identification with Black culture to be related to thicker body ideals, and higher levels of identification with American culture to be related to thinner body ideals. We further expect to find a contrast effect with external cultural cues; that is, exposure to Black cultural cues will lead to thinner body ideals than exposure to American culture cues.

## Method

**Participants.** Eighty-two women (mean age = 20.82 years,  $SD = 4.47$ ) participated in this study. All participants were born in the United States. Their average BMI was 25.04 ( $SD = 6.64$ ), which is considered just over the threshold for "overweight" according to the Department of Health and Human Services. Participants were primarily recruited through personal networks, using similar criteria and compensation as Study 1.

**Procedure.** Procedures and measures used in this study are identical to those of Study 1 with two key modifications. Because few studies on cultural priming have used Black Americans, all cultural cues were identified from Internet searches. Ten Black cultural cues were selected using the same pretest process as in Study 1. These include pictures of African attire and hairstyles.

Second, a different operationalization of the ideal body was used in Study 2. There is evidence that the figure rating scale used in Study 1 exemplifies White bodies, and Black-American women do not find them relevant as indicators of their ideal or current body types (Pulvers et al., 2004; Stunkard, Sorensen, & Schulsinger, 1983). Hence, we asked participants to report which figure they believed to be most attractive to men. Previous research suggests that, for Black women, cultural standards of beauty stem more from men's perspective rather than their own. For example, Poran (2006) found that Black-American women felt that men's opinions about their bodies were more important to them (regardless of the men's ethnicity) and felt more pressure to adhere to these standards. We use this item as an alternative way to capture standards for ideal body sizes for Black women, even though the figures may not accurately represent Black women's perceptions of their own bodies.

## Results

Summary of means, standard deviations, and correlations between key variables are presented in Table 3. Overall, participants identified more with Black culture than with mainstream American culture,  $t = -4.15$ ,  $p < .01$ . Identification with Black and American cultures were positively correlated ( $r = .23$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

**Hypothesis testing.** A simultaneous regression was performed with attractive figure size (that is, the figure participants perceived to be most attractive to men) as the dependent variable. Cultural cues (dummy coded), identification with Black culture, and identification with American culture were entered as predictors; age and BMI were included as covariates. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 4. The overall model was significant,  $F(5, 81) = 3.59$ ,  $p < .01$ , and explained 23% of the variance in attractive figure size. BMI was positively correlated with ideal figure when controlling for age, cultural cues, and cultural identification.

When controlling for BMI, age, and cultural cues, identification with American culture was negatively associated with attractive figure size ( $\beta = -.23$ ,  $p < .05$ ) or a thinner, more mainstream/American body ideal. Specifically, for every unit increase in identification in American culture, there was a .16 decrease in the figure size chosen as attractive, supporting hypothesis 1c. Hypothesis 1d was also supported; identification with Black culture was positively associated with attractive figure size ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Table 3  
*Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations of Continuous Measures Among African Americans (n = 82)*

Measures	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Ideal figure	—					
2. Figure attractive to men	.65**	—				
3. Age	.13	.06	—			
4. BMI	.53**	.24*	.40**	—		
5. American identification	-.16	-.16	.01	-.08	—	
6. Black identification	.12	.16	.01	.04	.23*	—
Mean	3.45		20.94	25.05	4.43	5.10
Standard deviation	1.00		5.11	6.64	1.44	1.11

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 4  
*Simultaneous Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Ideal Figures Size for African-American Women (n = 82)*

Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$	$sr^2$	$p^a$
Figure size attractive to men ( $R^2 = .19$ )					
Constant	2.21	.75			
Age	-.02	.02	-.08	.00	.24
BMI	.05	.02	.30	.07	.003
American identification	-.16	.22	-.23	.05	.02
Black identification	.17	.08	.18	.03	.05
American cue <sup>b</sup>	-.59	.10	-.29	.08	.004
Ideal figure size ( $R^2 = .37$ )					
Constant	1.41	.64			
Age	-.02	.02	-.12	.01	.14
BMI	.09	.02	.61	.29	<.00001
American identification	-.13	.07	-.18	.03	.05
Black identification	.10	.09	.11	.01	.16
American cue <sup>b</sup>	-.50	.19	-.25	.06	.01

<sup>a</sup>  $p$  value of standardized beta one-tail test. <sup>b</sup> American cues are compared with Black (African American) cues.

Specifically, for every unit increase in identification with Black culture, there was a .17 increase in attractive figure size. The effects of identification with Black culture on attractive figure size are independent of those effects of identification with American culture.

Compared with those in Black cultural cues conditions, participants in American cultural cues condition chose a thicker figure as attractive ( $\beta = .29, p < .01$ ). Participants in the American cue condition selected attractive figures that were .59 figures larger than those in the Black cue condition. The direction of the results is consistent with a contrast effect, supporting hypothesis 2b. Although we did not hypothesize any interactions between identification and cultural cues, we tested all possible interactions in post hoc analyses, and found no significant effects.<sup>4,5</sup>

## Discussion

Consistent with previous work showing a thicker or less thin body ideal among Black women, we found that internal identification with American culture was related to selecting thinner (or more normatively American) figures as attractive to men, whereas internal identification with Black culture was related to choosing thicker figures as attractive to men (Sabik, Cole, & Ward, 2010). We also found the predicted contrast effect of external cultural cues on selections of most attractive figures to men, where exposure to American cultural cues led to selecting a thicker (or more "Black") figure as being most attractive to men, and exposure to Black cues led to selecting a thinner (or more "American") figure as being most attractive to men.

## General Discussion

The present studies support previous research showing that body ideals are culturally bound. Yet our results show that the relationship between culture and body image is complex and can work in opposite ways depending on whether "culture" is conceptualized internally as subjective identification or externally as cues in the environment. Asian-American women who internally identified with Asian culture had thinner body ideals, but external Asian

cultural cues elicited thicker body ideals. Similarly, whereas Black-American women who internally identified with Black culture had thicker body ideals, external Black cultural cues elicited thinner body ideals. Although culture has been conceptualized internally and externally in different literatures, few studies have included *both* conceptualizations and systematically compared their effects.

Our findings show that internal and external conceptualizations of culture appear to trigger different psychological processes. Individuals who internally identify with a culture see their cultural

<sup>3</sup> We also ran the same simultaneous multiple regression with ideal figure as the dependent variable. Hypotheses 1c and 2b were supported. However, Hypothesis 1d was not supported. These results are also included in Table 4. Although overall variance explained is stronger for Black American's own ideal figure size, this is mostly a result of BMI being a stronger predictor, rather than the strength of our predictors. When it comes to cultural identification and cultural priming, our key predictors, our effects were stronger when predicting figure size men prefer, rather than Black women's own ideal figure size.

<sup>4</sup> There were no significant three-way interactions between American identification, Black identification, and cultural cue ( $\beta = -.02, t = -.17, ns$ ). For predicting ideal figure size, we found no significant two-way interactions between (1) American identification and Black identification ( $\beta = .09, t = .71, ns$ ), (2) American identification and cultural cue ( $\beta = .05, t = .36, ns$ ), and (3) Black identification and cultural cue ( $\beta = .18, t = 1.55, ns$ ). We also found no significant three-way interactions between American identification, Black identification, and cultural cue ( $\beta = -.04, t = -.33, ns$ ).

<sup>5</sup> To test whether our findings were comparable across two ethnic groups, we combined the data from Studies 1 and 2 to examine how ethnicity moderated our findings. The results support our hypotheses. First, ethnicity moderated the effects of ethnic identification on ideal figure size; ethnic identification was negatively related to ideal figure sizes for Asian Americans but positively related to ideal figure sizes for Black Americans. Ethnicity also moderated the effects of cultural cues on ideal figure size. Presentation of ethnic cues was related to thicker body ideals for Asian Americans compared with presentation of American cues, whereas the reverse was true for African Americans (see Figure 2).

group membership as an integral part of who they are; they are more likely to engage in events/behaviors that are related to that culture, choose friends, media, and even marital partners from that culture (Yeh & Huang, 1996). In contrast, external culture cues stem from the situation and exist outside of one's personal psychological state. For example, a McDonald's restaurant is a situational cue that is imbued with American cultural meaning (Chiu, Wan, Cheng, Kim, & Yang, 2010). When "culture" is experienced through such external cues rather than personally meaningful activities, people resist the cues' influence in conscious and non-conscious ways (Cheng & Lee, 2009; Glaser & Banaji, 1999; Zou, Morris, & Benet-Martínez, 2008). They may be driven to disassociate from these cues to show their independence and autonomy from situational influences; for example, realizing the "American-ness" of a McDonald's, Asian Americans may actively overcorrect for the biasing effects of these cues by adopting a less American and more Asian body ideal. External cultural cues may further elicit stereotype confirmation concerns, leading to efforts to disconfirm a cultural stereotype by endorsing a body ideal that is opposite of the cultural norm (Steele & Aronson, 1995). These various processes in response to externally imposed cultural cues have been shown to operate even when people strongly identify with the culture (Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002). It is important to note, however, that our research does not examine which of these processes contribute to the contrast effects observed in our studies. Future research is needed to examine these processes more systematically.

The finding that internal cultural identification and external cultural cues have opposite effects on body ideals sheds light on some of the conflicting findings in the current research on body image and culture. While some studies show differences in body image across cultural and ethnic groups, others do not (Grabe & Hyde, 2002). For instance, research on Black Americans seems to suggest that some women are "buffered" from body image issues because of less-thin cultural body ideals, whereas others have found no evidence of such buffering effects (Sabik, Cole, & Ward, 2010). Likewise, some studies show that Asian culture endorses a thinner body ideal, but others find no difference between Asian and American standards of ideal body sizes (e.g., Leung, Lam, & Sze, 2001). Other findings even suggest that Asian women's body ideal may value plumpness rather than thinness (as plumpness is associated with prosperity in Asian culture), and that Asian women have a more positive body image compared with Whites (Altabe, 1998; Chen & Swalm, 1998). There are many possible explanations for these conflicting findings, though we propose that the opposing effects of internal and external culture may help us understand these conflicting findings. For example, Black-American women who have a strong internal identification with their Black cultural group may show more buffering effects, but these buffering effects may be attenuated or even reversed if Black cultural values are highly salient in the external environment, leading to a contrast effect.

### Future Research

While the current study examined perceptions of body ideals for Black Americans and Asian Americans, future research should examine perceptions among other types of bicultural individuals. For example, some studies have found that Latinas more accultur-

ated to the mainstream/American culture reported higher body dissatisfaction, suggesting that, like Black culture, Latino culture values a more curvaceous and thicker body ideal than mainstream/American culture (e.g., de Casanova, 2004; Pepper & Ruiz, 2007; Pompper & Koenig, 2004). Mexican-American immigrants who were more acculturated to the mainstream American culture were more likely to prefer thinness—the relatively more mainstream/American and less Latino/ethnic body ideal (Cachelin, Schug, Juarez, & Monreal, 2005). Our current results with Black Americans may be replicated with Latina Americans.

Future research is also needed to address limitations of the current studies. First, we used the Stunkard Figure Rating Scale in both of our studies to compare trends across the two studies. Although other researchers have used this the same scale in ethnically diverse samples including Asian Americans and Black Americans, the scale was originally developed among White/European women, and its validity in capturing body ideals among other cultures is questionable (Barnett, Keel & Conoscenti, 2001; Cox, Zunker, Wingo, Thomas, & Ard, 2010). Future research needs to replicate our results with figure rating scales that are validated among different ethnic groups. For example, Pulver and colleagues' (2004) figure rating scale may be more appropriate to use among Black-American women because it is more representative of their bodies. Another limitation to the Stunkard Figure Rating Scale is that the body ideals only varied in weight. Other studies have found other measures of body ideals, such as waist-to-hip ratio (Freedman, Carter, Sbrocco, & Gray, 2004; Freedman, Carter, Sbrocco, & Gray, 2007). Future research should also include these measures as different ways to operationalize body ideals.

Second, it is important to note that we only examined women in our studies. Cultural influences in body image may be more relevant for women because women are often "bearers of culture" who uphold cultural ideals and standards (Mahalingam & Haritos, 2006). As such, women and men may be differentially influenced by cultural standards of body ideals, and cultural identification and cultural cues may have a similar, albeit weaker relationships to body ideal among men (Ricciardelli, McCabe, Williams, & Thompson, 2007). At the same time, recent evidence showing that body image problems are becoming increasingly prevalent for men, suggesting that the patterns observed in the present studies might be replicated for men (Morgan & Arcelus, 2009). Again, future studies are needed to examine these gender differences.

Third, this study defined biculturalism in a very specific way, and alternative definitions exist. For example, many theorists have defined biculturalism based on individuals' strength of identification with various cultural groups. Berry (1990), for example, argued that bicultural individuals use four distinct strategies to manage their multiple cultural identities: *assimilation* (identification with only the dominant culture), *integration* (identification with both cultures), *separation* (identification with only the ethnic culture), or *marginalization* (low identification with both cultures). Roccas and Brewer (2002) similarly proposed four general strategies individuals use to manage multiple identities—*intersection* (e.g., an Asian American will identify only with other Asian Americans), *dominance* (e.g., an Asian American will identify only with other Asians), *compartmentalization* (e.g., an Asian American will identify with Asians or

Americans depending on external cues), and *merger* (e.g., an Asian American who identifies with Asians and with Americans). In short, many psychological theories consider biculturalism to be a matter of the mind.

In contrast, we considered women belonging to Asian or Black ethnic groups living in the United States as “bicultural” because of their exposure of their ethnic culture and the mainstream culture. Indeed, we were interested in how varying levels of identification with each culture relate to body image, and as such we did not limit our definition of bicultural individuals to only those who strongly identify with both cultures. This operationalization of biculturalism—as exposure or accessibility to cultural schemas rather than identification with cultural groups—is also evident in the biculturalism literature. For example, a large literature on Bicultural Identity Integration (or BII) typically defines bicultural individuals as those who have lived in two cultures for at least five years each (Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002). Another literature on individuals with global or multicultural identities similarly defines bicultural individuals as people who have lived in more than one culture for a minimal number of years (sometimes with the constraint that such experiences need to occur before the age of 18; Brannen, Garcia, & Thomas, 2009). While there is no one way or right way to define biculturalism, future research is needed to examine both experiential/exposure-based definitions of biculturalism and psychological/identification-based definitions of biculturalism and how these different conceptualizations of biculturalism affect the relationship between culture and body image.

Fourth, while we used cultural priming to examine the effect of cultural cues on behavior, this methodology is not without weaknesses. We argue that the cues prime or activate a set of culturally endorsed beliefs and behaviors, but most researchers who use priming as a methodology do not directly test the question of what exact schema(s) the cues elicit. For example, the image of the Statue of Liberty may prime American culture, but it may also prime whiteness, a melting pot, immigration policy, freedom, tourism, New York, or a whole host of other unrelated attitudes or concepts. Researchers using cultural priming methodologies *assume* that if participants behave in predictable ways consistent with previously known cultural differences, then the cue must have elicited a specific cultural schema. Lacking in this research tradition, however, is an in-depth exploration of participants’ own conceptualizations of what it means to be American, nor the participants’ beliefs, attitudes, or perceptions vis-à-vis each of the cues. Additionally, whereas cultural priming techniques expose participants to a singular cultural cue at a time (e.g., our participants were randomly assigned to view either ethnic or mainstream cultural cues), our environment is usually imbued with multiple and even conflicting cultural cues. As such, it may be difficult to understand how our findings generalize to real-life scenarios faced by most bicultural individuals. In future research, the types of cultural primes researchers use may need to be revised and retested to account for the increasingly complex and multifaceted nature of people’s cultural environments.

## Conclusion

Overall, our findings have important implications for cultural research and theory. Our results show that it is important for cultural psychologists to consider *both* internal and external conceptualizations of culture. This is especially true in research on

body image, where culture and ethnicity are typically operationalized as subjective, intrapsychic beliefs and attitudes. For example, culture is frequently measured by asking participants to identify their membership in an ethnic group or by assessing degrees of cultural acculturation (Altabe, 1998; Barnett, Keel, & Conoscenti, 2001; Lau, Lum, Chronister, & Forrest, 2006). While these studies might have captured internal culture, the effects of external culture on body image have been largely ignored in the literature. There is a handful of studies that have examined how external cues in the media affect body image, but these studies did not focus on cues that have cultural meaning or relevance (Aubrey & Taylor, 2009; Bell, Lawton, & Dittmar, 2007; Ginis, Prapavessis, & Haase, 2008). Our results show that this is an important omission; because our environments are inundated with cultural cues that prime and activate culturally bound values and behaviors, understanding the impact of these cues on body image is critical.

More generally, our studies support the idea that culture is dynamic and socially constructed. In contrast to earlier cultural research where culture was considered monolithic (individuals are located in one culture only), stable (one’s cultural group membership is unchanging across time and situation), and geographically determined (culture is determined by where one lives), our findings show that culture can be (a) internally represented as a schema of attitudes, values, and belief systems, (b) multifaceted such that people can adopt the values and norms of multiple cultural groups, and (c) malleable depending on situational cues and stimuli. This supports more current psychological frameworks showing that culture is a complex interplay of internal states and environmental influences (Hong, 2009).

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