

Assignment Discovery Online Curriculum

Lesson title:

Culture and Obesity

Grade level:

9-12, with adaptation for younger students

Subject area:

Contemporary Issues

Duration:

Two class periods

Objectives:

Students will

1. learn how culture influences body perception;
2. examine prejudices toward obese people; and
3. examine their own feelings about their bodies.

Materials:

- Psychology textbooks, periodicals, and other text resources
- Computer with Internet access (optional but very helpful)
- Copies of Classroom Activity Sheet: Three Women
- Copies of Classroom Activity Sheet: Tally of Students' Perceptions of Body Weight and Size
- Copies of Take-Home Activity Sheet: Your Opinion About Weight and Body Image

Procedures:

1. Begin the lesson by giving students the Classroom Activity Sheet: Three Women. Tell students to look at the pictures and respond to the questions. Students should not attempt to make informed answers; they should give their initial reactions by responding quickly. They should *not* write their names on the sheets.
2. Collect the Classroom Activity Sheet: Three Women. Select one or two students to tally students' responses on the Classroom Activity Sheet: Tally of Students' Perceptions of Body Shape and Size .
3. While these students tally the responses, ask the class why you presented the survey without any introductory discussion. Responses will vary, but most students will suggest that you are trying to gauge attitudes toward overweight and thin people.
4. Have students present the survey results, and discuss them with the class. Typically, the thin women (A and B) receive the most positive responses, while the heaviest woman (C)

receives the most negative responses. Discuss how students came to their conclusions. Students' comments may include the following:

- "Woman C is heavy, so she must be the most unhealthy."
- "Since woman C is heavy, she can't be making wise decisions consistently, because fat people eat too much, and they eat bad food."
- "Woman C isn't attractive because she's too big. She should lose weight."
- "That woman needs to work out."

Conclude the discussion by summarizing students' responses.

5. Divide students into four groups. Ask each group to consider how society influences our perceptions of overweight and obese people. Encourage students to consider the many ways we get information, including family and friends, television, movies, music, literature, and advertisements. Have each group prepare a presentation that includes the following:
 - A paragraph focusing on the group's ideas about how these factors influence our perceptions of overweight and obese people. It should state the factors that have the most influence and why.
 - A summary, based on research, of the factors that influence society's perceptions of overweight and obese people. Research material may include pictures from magazines, advertisements, examples from movies and books, and any other resources about body perception.
 - A conclusion about the group's original ideas: Were they supported by research, or did they change? Students should explain how and why any of their ideas changed.
6. Suggest that students use magazines, newspapers, and resources from the library and the Internet, such as the following Web sites:
<http://www.atlantaparent.com/First%20Page%20APRIL%2001.htm>
http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/lose_wt/risk.htm
<http://www.cornell.edu/food/expfiles/topics/sobal/sobaloverview.html>
http://webmd.lycos.com/content/dmk/dmk_article_40062
7. Have each group share its presentation. Do the groups agree on how society influences our perceptions of overweight and obese people? Do they believe that one factor is more significant than others? If so, which one? Why do they think that factor is so important?
8. Conclude the lesson by asking students whether their opinions in the original survey have changed as a result of their research. Would they answer the questions differently now? What information has changed their perceptions of overweight and obese people?
9. Assign the Take-Home Activity Sheet: Your Opinion About Weight and Body Image. If time permits, discuss students' responses during the next class period. What have students learned about their feelings about overweight and obese people? What have they learned about their feelings about their own bodies?

Adaptation for younger students:

Focus on the survey and tally sheet. Have a discussion about students' feelings about overweight and obese people. Do they have prejudices? Are these prejudices fostered by the media? You may use the questions on the Take-Home Activity Sheet as a guide for class discussions.

Discussion Questions:

1. Men in three Matsigenka villages in southeastern Peru were shown six drawings of women that differed only in body weight and waist size. The men chose a drawing for each of these categories: healthiest, most attractive, and best potential spouse. The overwhelming winner in *every* category was the drawing of the heaviest woman with the thickest waist. Why might the Matsigenka men perceive heaviness as attractive?
2. What is the difference between being overweight and being obese? Can an individual be healthy and overweight? Explain.
3. In the 1990s, more than 5 million American women suffered from eating disorders. This may be evidence that many American women have difficulty accepting their bodies. In your opinion, what must be done to help Americans accept their own bodies?
4. We usually think of fat as negative, but fat serves many purposes in the human body. Why do our bodies contain fat? What happens if a person's body fat is too low?
5. Some health risks are associated with having too much body fat. Research and explain three such risks.
6. How much body fat is healthy for a teenage girl? How much is healthy for a teenage boy? Why do you suppose that a healthy girl has more body fat than a healthy boy?

Evaluation:

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' group work during this lesson:

Three points: cooperative work; accurate completion of the research assignment; demonstration of a clear understanding of the relationship between culture and weight; demonstration of a heightened realization of the need for more sensitivity toward people who are overweight or obese

Two points: somewhat cooperative work; completion of most of the research assignment with some level of accuracy; demonstration of some understanding of the relationship between culture and weight; demonstration of some understanding of the need for more sensitivity toward people who are overweight or obese

One point: trouble working cooperatively; completion of a small portion of the research assignment with some accuracy; demonstration of little or no understanding of the relationship between culture and weight; demonstration of little or no understanding of the need for more sensitivity toward people who are overweight or obese

Extensions:

Genes and Obesity

Some people are overweight or obese because they have a condition they cannot control. Have students research and write a short paper about one of the conditions listed below. They should include the following information:

- A description of the condition and its effect on body weight
- Information about the prevalence of the condition
- Other problems associated with the condition
- The relationship between genes, diet, and lifestyle
- How people with this condition try to control their weight

Cushing's syndrome. This syndrome is a hormonal disorder in which the hypothalamus or adrenal gland malfunctions: pituitary tumors may appear, cortisol levels increase, and the person gains weight. About 10 to 15 million people are affected annually. Web site: <http://www.niddk.nih.gov/health/endo/pubs/cushings/cushings.htm>

Prader-Willi syndrome. This is a complex disorder in which the hypothalamus is malformed or damaged because of genetic factors, injury, or brain surgery. The sufferer never feels full after eating, leading to morbid obesity. It is estimated that 1 in 12,000 to 15,000 people suffer from PWS, the most common cause of genetic obesity identified. Web site: www.pwsausa.org/basicfac.htm

Hypothyroidism. Underactivity of the thyroid gland slows the body's normal rate of metabolism. The condition occurs in 2 of every 100 people; many cases can be treated successfully. Web site: www.thyroid.org/patient/brochur5.htm

Weight and Entertainers

Divide students into small groups. Ask them to name as many chubby performers (living or dead) as possible in the categories of music, film, and television. Students can research periodicals or the Internet. Have students compare the number of female performers on their lists with the number of male performers. Is there a difference in the numbers of male and female performers? (*There should be more men.*) Ask students why they think this discrepancy exists. Then ask them to analyze each performance category. Are some more likely to contain overweight performers? (*A group might say that there have been many overweight male and female comedians.*) Ask students why they think one category seems to have more heavy performers. Finally, ask students whether they believe there is more prejudice against overweight women than there is against overweight men in the entertainment industry. Make sure students support their answers with specific examples.

Suggested Reading:

Fat: Fighting the Obesity Epidemic

Robert Pool. Oxford University Press, 2001.

Using information gleaned from decades of research into appetite, metabolism, body fat, diet, and weight control, this book describes the latest understandings about obesity and the interplay of genes and behavior. Lots of case histories illustrate the struggle to control one's weight and where the battle is being waged today. Chapter notes are included.

The Adonis Complex: The Secret Crisis of Male Body Obsession

Harrison Pope, Jr., Katherine Phillips, and Roberto Olivardia. The Free Press, 2000.

There are many books on the market about female body image, but here's a different view. Men can be as obsessed with their appearance as women and resort to any number of unsafe behaviors to try to mold themselves in a particular way. Chapters discuss excessive weight training, steroid use, eating disorders, and distorted body image. Lots of case studies, diagnostic questionnaires, and suggestions for treatment make this an absorbing book.

Vocabulary:

morbid obesity

Definition: Weight gain that interferes with breathing and other vital functions.

Context: If a person's weight is 50 percent or more over the maximum desirable for his or her height, then that person is considered to suffer from **morbid obesity**.

obesity

Definition: Weight that is 20 to 25 percent more than the maximum desirable for a person's height.

Context: There are multiple causes for the development of **obesity**, including a genetic propensity and overeating.

overweight

Definition: Weighing more than 25 to 35 pounds over the maximum desirable for a person's height.

Context: Karen was constantly frustrated because no matter how little she ate and how much she exercised, she remained **overweight**.

prejudice

Definition: A negative attitude or prejudgment toward a particular group.

Context: Many people have a **prejudice** against overweight people because they assume that people with weight problems are undisciplined and lazy.

Academic Standards:**Grade level:**

6-8

Subject area:

Health

Standard:

Knows environmental and external factors that affect individual and community health.

Benchmark:

Understands how various messages from the media, technology, and other sources impact health practices.

Credit: Meredith McClure-Scott, social studies teacher, Catonsville High School, Catonsville, Maryland.

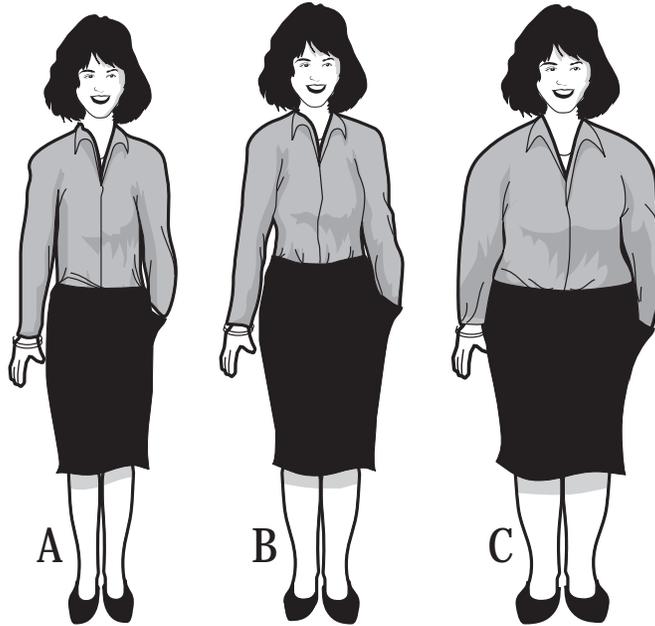
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Three Women



Look at the three pictures above. Then answer the following questions by placing an X in the appropriate box. Please don't write your name on your paper.

	Woman A	Woman B	Woman C
1. Which woman is the most attractive?			
2. Which woman is the least attractive?			
3. Which woman is the smartest?			
4. Which woman is the least intelligent?			
5. Which woman makes good decisions consistently?			
6. Which woman tends to make unwise decisions?			
7. Which woman is the healthiest?			
8. Which woman is the least healthy?			

Tally of Students' Perceptions of Body Shape and Size

Write down the number of students who took the survey. Then fill out the chart below, indicating how they responded to each question.

	Woman A	Woman B	Woman C
Q1 (positive)			
Q2 (negative)			
Q3 (positive)			
Q4 (negative)			
Q5 (positive)			
Q6 (negative)			
Q7 (positive)			
Q8 (negative)			

How many positive responses did each woman receive?

Woman A _____ Woman B _____ Woman C _____

How many negative responses did each woman receive?

Woman A _____ Woman B _____ Woman C _____

Which woman received the highest number of positive responses? _____

Which woman received the highest number of negative responses? _____

Your Opinion About Weight and Body Image

Answer the following questions. Be prepared to discuss them in class.

1. Describe what life would be like for someone who is seriously overweight and has trouble losing weight. How might other students or family members treat that person? What difficulties and prejudices might an overweight person have to overcome in school or when looking for a job?

2. Stage actress Lillian Russell, who weighed around 200 pounds, was considered a great beauty in the 1890s. Do you think Ms. Russell would be considered attractive today? Explain. Support your answer with examples from television, film, and the music industry.

3. In 1987, the average fashion model weighed 23 percent less than the average American woman. How might this affect the way average people perceive their own bodies? Explain.

4. What is your body image? Are you comfortable with your weight? How are you affected by images of ultrathin models in the media?