

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF FOOD HABITS, BODY IMAGE AND OBESITY IN BLACK-AMERICAN WOMEN IN COLUMBIA, MISSOURI

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ABSTRACT

Obesity as a growing epidemic in the United States occurs in higher rates within Black-American populations. Although 100 million Americans in the United States are considered overweight or obese, Black-American women have the highest prevalence rate of obesity than any other subgroup. Most studies focus on unhealthy eating practices, lack of exercise, sedentary lifestyles, differential access to nutritious food and lack of adequate healthcare as contributors of obesity in Black-American women. But these studies are narrow in approach, lacking cultural constructions and food habits pertinent to the history and biography of Black-Americans. This dissertation explores Black women's perceptions of black culture, food habits, body image and obesity in Columbia, Missouri.

This dissertation is theoretically rooted in the tradition of symbolic interaction, which is best suited to explore the culturally derived ritualistic behaviors and traditions within Black Culture. By investigating food habits and cooking practices as symbolic manifestations, direct associations to the development of self, identity and in-group ethnic affiliation emerges. This research uses narratives from 15 in-depth interviews, compiled over a two year period. Results indicate black women's perceptions of self, identity, food habits, and body image was socio-cultural constructions. When holistically viewed, insights provided rich interpretations of one's life experiences and interactions within the groups' cultural milieu.