

## **Do Racial Minorities Respond in the Same Way to Mainstream Beauty Standards? Social Comparison Processes in Asian, Black, and White Women**

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*Some members of stigmatized groups, such as Asian women, may be more likely to experience negative self-evaluations after exposure to a mainstream beauty standard than members of other stigmatized groups, such as Black women. In this study, 54 Asian women, 52 Black women, and 64 White women, were exposed to mainstream standards of beauty and compared themselves to these idealized images. It was hypothesized that although Black women would find these comparisons irrelevant, Asian women would see these targets as relevant for their comparisons, reflecting their striving for mainstream beauty standards. The results indicated that Black women did not find mainstream standards as relevant to themselves, and reported positive self-evaluations generally and about their bodies in particular. Asian women, on the other hand, responded differently than Black women and were more likely to endorse mainstream beauty standards in a similar fashion to White women. As predicted, Asian women also experienced greater dissatisfaction with their bodies than did Black women.*

In American society, many women strive to attain mainstream, Western standards of beauty, which are derived from a predominantly Anglo-Saxon influence. In fact, physical appearance seems to be the most important predictor of overall self-evaluation in female college and high school students (Jackson, Hodge, & Ingram, 1994). Moreover, studies about dating indicate that sometimes the only significant predictor of whether an individual will be initially attracted to a blind date is if the date is physically attractive (Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottman, 1966). Given that physical appearance is an important aspect of women's self-concept, that physical attractiveness is meaningful for impressions in general, and that mainstream

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standards of beauty are so pervasive in American culture (Bernstein, Lin, & McClellan, 1982), this study investigates the self-evaluation of minority women, namely Asian and Black women, whose physical appearance may be very different from that of prescribed western standards of beauty.

Although past studies have ascertained that Black women are able to maintain positive self-evaluations about their physical appearance despite the pervasive presence of White beauty standards (Makkar & Strube, 1995; Rucker & Cash, 1992), there have been very few studies examining Asian women's responses to mainstream standards of beauty (Mok, 1998). Studying Asian women and their body image satisfaction is particularly important because of a growing trend among Asian women to be desirous of a body type promoted by western standards of beauty (Iijima-Hall, 1995; Matsuura, Fujimura, Nozawa, Iida, & Hirayama, 1992). This trend has been associated with more frequent incidences of body image disturbances, such as eating disorders, among Asian women in the last two decades (Iijima-Hall, 1995; Lee, 1993). Therefore, the current study addressed whether Asian women's responses to norms of beauty would be more consistent with those of the majority culture (i.e., White women) or would be more consistent with those of Black women, a minority group who has been shown to not identify with mainstream standards of beauty (e.g., Hebl & Heatherton, 1998; Quinn & Crocker, 1998).

Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory suggests that people compare themselves to others when they are not certain about their opinions or qualities, particularly when standards are subjective. Thus, social comparison theory would predict that women may compare themselves to societal standards of beauty in order to assess their own level of attractiveness. For instance, Thornton and Moore (1993) found that women's self-ratings of attractiveness and social self-esteem were lower after exposure to a physically attractive, same-sex model than after exposure to a physically unattractive, same-sex model. Similarly, other studies have indicated that women experience a decrease in self-esteem, but an increase in self-consciousness, physique anxiety, and body dissatisfaction after being exposed to photographs of models who exemplify mainstream standards of beauty (Thornton & Maurice, 1997, 1999). This physical contrast effect holds true when women compare themselves to their attractive same-sex peers, as well as to professional models (Cash, Cash, & Butters, 1983).

Although upward social comparisons to mainstream beauty standards may cause a person to feel negatively about herself, research has shown that self-evaluations for certain social groups do not necessarily suffer in the face of an unflattering social comparison (Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). Crocker and Major (1989) argued that members of stigmatized groups may adopt certain strategies for self-protection under potentially threatening events. With respect to beauty standards, members of stigmatized groups may compare themselves mostly with in-group members rather than to women who exemplify mainstream beauty ideals (i.e., White women). Additionally, members of stigmatized groups may engage in psychological disidentification, in which those who are stigmatized in a particular domain will be less likely to use that domain as a basis of self-esteem (Crocker et al., 1998; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Thus, in terms of physical appearance, Asian and Black women may disidentify from western standards of beauty and disregard them as a source of self-esteem.

The assertions about self-protective strategies in the face of an unflattering social comparison (Crocker & Major, 1989; see also Crocker et al., 1998) seems to hold true for Black women. As shown by Kerr, Crocker, and Broadnax

(1995), Black women respond to the stigmatizing effect of being overweight by not adhering to cultural standards of thinness as relevant for their self-evaluations. For example, Black women report less negative affect about being overweight and less negativity toward other overweight women, thereby appearing to reject mainstream standards of thinness (Hebl & Heatherton, 1998; Quinn & Crocker, 1998). These studies suggest that Black women are not strongly affected by mainstream standards of beauty, which is consistent with findings that Black women have greater body satisfaction than do White women (Rucker & Cash, 1992). Correspondingly, several studies have concluded that Blacks, both men and women, have equivalent or greater levels of global self-esteem than do Whites (Porter & Washington, 1979; Rosenberg, 1979; Wylie, 1979).

Although many aspects of the self-protective properties of stigma perspective appear to be well substantiated for Blacks (Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker et al., 1998), research has not extensively examined whether Asians also employ self-protective strategies in response to potentially threatening events, such as upward social comparisons to mainstream standards of beauty. On the contrary, studies of Asians would suggest that they are not as likely to protect their self-esteem like other stigmatized groups and may suffer from lower self-evaluation as a consequence. For example, there has been speculation that Asian women may have difficulty maintaining positive self-perceptions after exposure to mainstream ideals of beauty (Mok, 1998). Consistent with this reasoning, it has been shown that both Asian men and women rate Whites as being more physically attractive than Asians (Fujino, 1993; Sue & Morishima, 1982; White & Chan, 1983). In addition, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgery and Reconstruction Surgeon's 1993 report, Asians are more likely than any other ethnic group to pursue cosmetic surgery (Chen, 1993). Although 80 percent of White patients request liposuction, breast augmentation, or wrinkle removal, over 40 percent of Asian patients ask for eyelid surgery, and another 20 percent request nasal implants or nasal tip refinements (Kaw, 1991). As Kaw (1991) observes, the popular surgeries for Whites do not change their racial makeup, whereas the surgeries for Asians attempt to undo physical features related to race.

Thus, contrary to the stigma and self-protection research (Crocker & Major, 1989), Asians, unlike Blacks, may forgo self-protective strategies, such as adopting ingroup standards of comparison, and instead strive for White, mainstream standards of physical beauty. Adopting White standards may provide difficult, or impossible-to-attain upward comparisons for Asian women, which may then negatively impact how they feel about their physical appearance. Moreover, these feelings of negativity should be especially powerful for women who report greater baseline dissatisfaction with their bodies. Previous body image research indicates that initial body dissatisfaction has been shown to affect whether women will feel negatively about themselves after exposure to attractive models (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995; Posavac, Posavac, & Posavac, 1998). That is, those who are further from their desired self or who are not making progress toward a desired self are especially likely to experience negative self-directed affect when these discrepancies are made salient (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Higgins, 1987, 1997).

Although Asians and Blacks are both ethnic minorities in North American culture, they may respond very differently to similar events. For example, one reason why Asians may experience more negativity toward the self than Blacks after

comparing themselves to mainstream beauty standards is because Asians may be more likely than Blacks to conform to cultural norms in general. As discussed by Markus and Kitayama (1991), Asians may believe in a relatively strong interdependence between the self and the dominant culture because of their collectivistic tendencies. Thus, Asian women may want to conform to cultural norms and perceive themselves in a manner consistent with the prescribed norms of beauty more so than do Black women. Because Black women may be more likely to use Black in-group standards to evaluate themselves and Asian women may evaluate themselves against the dominant culture's standards, Asian women may also suffer psychologically because of the difficulty in realizing those ideals (Mok, 1998; Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1986; Trepagnier, 1994).

In sum, research has suggested that certain stigmatized groups employ self-protective strategies in the face of unflattering social comparison (Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker et al., 1998), which may then be associated with more positive self-evaluations. The current study examined whether these outcomes are revealed in the domain of physical attractiveness for Asian women and for Black women. In particular, we predicted several outcomes. First, Black women should be less likely to adopt mainstream standards of beauty for their comparisons than Asian women and White women, which should be reflected by Blacks' relatively lower physical attractiveness ratings of a Caucasian target model. After viewing photographs of target Asian, Black, and White females, Black women should also prefer Black ingroup members to members of other ethnic groups, whereas Asian women should show preferences for beauty standards outside of the Asian ingroup, especially for White women.

Further, Black women should reveal greater self-esteem and greater body-esteem following exposure to mainstream standards of beauty than will Asian women or White women, who should show more negative self-evaluations. These negative self-evaluations should be especially strong for Asian and White women who describe themselves as having a low sense of body satisfaction because upward social comparisons resulting in greater perceived self-discrepancies should exacerbate the negative affect that results from such reflections. Finally, we expected that Black women should report less conformity to cultural norms than Asian women or White women. Thus, Black women should also report fewer mismatches between their actual and ideal selves in terms of physical attractiveness than Asian women or White women because mainstream standards of beauty will seem less applicable to Black women. Conversely, Asian women should report the greatest amount of conformity and correspondingly, they should also report the greatest degree of mismatches between their actual and ideal selves in terms of physical attractiveness.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

At Michigan State University, 54 Asian women, 52 Black women, and 64 White women were recruited from introductory psychology classes and through campus ethnic organizations (e.g., Chinese Student Coalition, dormitory Black caucuses). Those who participated through psychology classes were given extra credit for their participation in this study. Those who participated through campus ethnic organizations were entered into a cash prize lottery.

*Mainstream Standards of Beauty Stimuli*

Three full-body, color photographs of attractive White female models were shown to participants to provide exposure to mainstream standards of beauty.<sup>1</sup> All three photographs depicted a thin, blonde, blue-eyed, fair-skinned female. Thus, the models exemplified a western standard of beauty and were clearly neither Asian nor Black. The photographs served two purposes. First, they were an upward comparison point to which the participants could compare themselves directly. Second, the photographs were used to initiate thinking about the self and participants' feelings of physical attractiveness.

*Measures****Body Attractiveness***

The body esteem scale (BES; Franzoi & Shields, 1984) was administered to participants in order for them to actively reflect on the physical attractiveness of the photographed models as well as their own level of physical attractiveness. The participants rated the one target model that they found to be the most attractive of the three using the BES, and they then rated themselves using the BES as well. For the model and themselves, they assessed 18 body parts (e.g., nose, lips, ears, thighs, buttocks, hips) on a scale ranging from 1 (strong negative feelings) to 5 (strong positive feelings). In the current study, the BES scale was very reliable for the ratings of the model,  $\alpha = .93$ , and for the participants' ratings of themselves,  $\alpha = .89$ .

***Overall Self-Attractiveness***

The BES does not assess ratings of overall self-attractiveness. Thus, an additional question was asked to obtain an overall self-attractiveness score. Participants were asked to rate the attractiveness of the one target model that they found to be most attractive of the three on a scale from 1 (very unattractive) to 9 (very attractive), with 5 as a neutral midpoint. Participants then rated their own attractiveness using the same scale.

***Who Would You Want To Be?***

Following the logic of Clark and Clark's (1939) doll study in which a majority of Black children preferred White dolls over Black dolls, yearbook photographs of attractive Asian, Black, and White women (pretested by White female students who were not involved with the current study to ensure that the target photographs were both above average in attractiveness and were also equally attractive using the same 9-point pretest scales) were shown to participants. Participants stated how much they wanted to look like each woman in the photographs on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). This task was used to assess the degree to which participants would endorse Asian, Black, or mainstream standards as desirable.

***Global Self-Esteem***

Global self-esteem was assessed by using Rosenberg's (1965) 10-item self-esteem questionnaire. Participants rated themselves on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) on items such as "I feel that I have a number of good qualities" and "I wish I could have more respect for myself." Global self-esteem was assessed twice by splitting the 10-item scale into two 5-item halves. Participants rated their global self-esteem on the first 5 questions at the beginning of the experiment

( $\alpha = .78$ ) and rated themselves on the last 5 questions at the conclusion of the experiment ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

### *Conformity to Norms*

The need for uniqueness scale (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977) was used to measure participants' desires to set themselves apart from other people and to not adhere to social norms. In this study, this scale was used to assess the extent to which participants value conforming to norms. The 32-item questionnaire includes items such as "It bothers me if people think I am being too unconventional" and "Feeling different in a crowd of people makes me feel uncomfortable." Conformity was measured by asking participants to rate themselves on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) with some items being reverse scored before computing the sum,  $\alpha = .81$ . Larger scores indicated a stronger desire to conform to societal norms.

### *Actual versus Ideal Self*

Self-discrepancy theory suggests that people who believe that their actual and ideal selves are discrepant will be more likely to experience lower self-esteem and greater dissatisfaction than those who believe that their actual and ideal selves are less discrepant (Higgins, 1987; Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1985). Thus, a modified version of the selves questionnaire (Higgins et al., 1985) was administered to participants to evaluate how much their actual physical self and ideal physical self matched in terms of beauty and attractiveness (e.g., "I want to be short, and I am short" versus "I want to be tall, but I am short").

Participants listed 10 physical characteristics that they believed they actually possessed and rated the importance of having those physical characteristics on a scale ranging from 1 (very unimportant) to 7 (very important). Following the actual selves questionnaires, participants were asked to list up to 10 physical characteristics that they wished they ideally possessed and to rate the importance of possessing those ideal physical traits on a scale ranging from 1 (very unimportant) to 7 (very important). Participants were then asked to return to their ideal list and to rate themselves on how far away they were from reaching their ideal self on a scale ranging from 1 (very close to being ideal) to 7 (not close at all to being ideal).

For each ideal trait, the rating of its importance was multiplied by the rating of how far away they were from the ideal, and the mean of these products was computed as the measure of mismatches between one's ideal and actual selves. This method of obtaining mismatch scores allowed for discerning the magnitude of the discrepancies rather than only calculating the number of mismatches. Larger mismatch scores indicated greater discrepancies on important physical traits, which should reflect participants' relatively lower satisfaction with their appearance than those with smaller mismatch scores.

### *Procedure*

Participants were greeted by a White female experimenter of modest physical attractiveness. They were told that the purpose of the experiment was to explore the self-concept formation of women and that they would complete several questionnaires pertaining to self-concept.

Participants first completed the Time 1 portion (pre-exposure to models) of the Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale and were then asked to respond to several other

filler questionnaires that could be construed as pertaining to self-concept formation. At this point, participants were told that because the experiment on self-concept formation required the participants to complete many questionnaires, they would take a “break” before completing the remaining questionnaires. They were told that there was a study on attractiveness being conducted by another researcher, and they were asked to participate in this study during their “break.” All participants agreed. It was during this “break” that participants were exposed to the photographs of the physically attractive models. This deception was necessary so that participants would not associate the self-evaluation measures with their self-reports of attractiveness. All participants then viewed three photographs of attractive mainstream models and were asked to identify which of the three models was most attractive to them. Next, they rated that model on the BES (Franzoi & Shields, 1984) and assessed her overall attractiveness. Afterwards, participants rated themselves on both the BES and on overall attractiveness in order to measure their feelings about their own self-attractiveness.

Next, participants viewed three photographs of attractive target women, one Asian woman, one Black woman, and one White woman. The participants rated each woman in terms of the extent to which they would want to look like each. In the last part of the “break” (i.e., the attractiveness portion of the study), participants completed the modified version of the selves questionnaire (Higgins et al., 1985) to assess physical appearance self-mismatches. None of the participants voiced any suspicions about the physical attractiveness portion of the study nor did they report perceiving any association between the “separate” studies.

Participants were then asked to finish the “initial study,” which entailed completing the need for uniqueness scale (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977) to measure participants’ degree of conformity and completing the Time 2 portion (post-exposure to models) of the self-esteem scale in order to assess any changes in global self-esteem following exposure to the mainstream standards of beauty. Participants were thanked and debriefed at the end of the experiment.

## Results

### *Model Overall Attractiveness and BES*

A chi-square analysis indicated that participants did not differ in their choice of the best looking model as a function of race,  $\chi^2(N = 170, 4) = 8.35$ , *ns*. In order to assess whether all participants found the chosen model to be above average in attractiveness, t-tests were conducted relative to the scale’s midpoint (neutral attractiveness). Results showed that all participants found their chosen models to be above average in attractiveness,  $t(53) = 11.33$ ,  $p < .001$  (for Asians),  $t(63) = 16.25$ ,  $p < .001$  (for Whites), and  $t(51) = 7.86$ ,  $p < .001$  (for Blacks). However, as Table 1 reports, a between-groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed a main effect of participant race,  $F(2, 167) = 9.75$ ,  $p < .001$ . Consistent with hypotheses, follow-up tests (using Tukey’s HSD for multiple comparisons) found that Black women rated the mainstream model as less attractive than did Asian women or White women, who did not significantly differ from each other in their ratings of the model.

Participants also rated the models on the BES. Similar to the findings of overall attractiveness for the model, a one-way ANOVA found a main effect of participant race,  $F(2, 167) = 12.01$ ,  $p < .001$ . As Table 1 indicates, Black women rated the mainstream standard the least favorably. Conversely, White women rated

**TABLE 1** Racial Differences Among Asian, White, and Black Women

Dependent variable	Race of participant		
	Asian	White	Black
Model overall attractiveness	7.2 <sub>a</sub>	7.5 <sub>a</sub>	6.4 <sub>b</sub>
Model body-esteem (BES)	65.8 <sub>b</sub>	70.2 <sub>a</sub>	61.9 <sub>c</sub>
Overall self-attractiveness	5.7 <sub>b</sub>	5.8 <sub>b</sub>	6.9 <sub>a</sub>
Self body-esteem (BES)	58.3 <sub>b</sub>	55.5 <sub>b</sub>	65.1 <sub>a</sub>
Yearbook photographs:			
Asian target	3.9 <sub>a</sub>	3.8 <sub>a</sub>	2.3 <sub>b</sub>
White target	3.1 <sub>a</sub>	3.7 <sub>a</sub>	1.7 <sub>b</sub>
Black target	3.3 <sub>a</sub>	3.4 <sub>a</sub>	3.5 <sub>a</sub>
Global Self-Esteem:			
Time 1	20.4 <sub>b</sub>	20.6 <sub>b</sub>	22.5 <sub>a</sub>
Time 2	18.6 <sub>b</sub>	18.9 <sub>b</sub>	21.3 <sub>a</sub>
Need for conformity	111.7 <sub>a</sub>	109.5 <sub>b</sub>	100.2 <sub>c</sub>
Mismatches between ideal and actual selves	207.5 <sub>a</sub>	197.7 <sub>b</sub>	163.8 <sub>c</sub>

*Note.* Cells in each row not sharing a common subscript differ at the .05 level using Tukey's Honestly Significant difference tests.

the mainstream standard the most favorably, and Asian women's ratings of the mainstream standard fell between Black women's and White women's ratings. Taken together, these results suggest that Black women did not find the mainstream standard of beauty as desirable as did White women or Asian women. Asian women, on the other hand, may not have found mainstream standard as desirable as White women did, but they found her more desirable than did Black women.

#### *Overall Self-Attractiveness and Self-BES*

We also predicted that because Black women do not find mainstream beauty standards to be as applicable as do Asian women or White women, Black women's ratings of their own Overall Self-Attractiveness and Body Self-Esteem should be greater than that of Asian women or White women. Indeed, as Table 1 reports, one-way ANOVAs on Overall Self-Attractiveness and Self-BES found this to be the case,  $F(2, 167) = 14.53, p < .001$ , and  $F(2, 167) = 10.42, p < .001$ , respectively. As predicted, Black women rated their Overall Self-Attractiveness and their Self-BES more favorably than did Asian women or White women, whose scores did not significantly differ from each other.

#### *Yearbook Photographs*

In order to assess the degree to which participants wanted to look like an Asian, White, or Black woman, a mixed-design ANOVA treating race of the yearbook photograph as a repeated measure and race of the participant as a between-subjects factor was used to analyze participants' ratings of the yearbook targets. Results yielded a main effect of yearbook race,  $F(2, 167) = 15.48, p < .001$ , and a main effect of participant race,  $F(2, 167) = 7.90, p < .001$ , both of which were qualified by



a significant interaction,  $F(4, 167) = 18.99$ ,  $p < .001$ . As shown in Table 1, Asian targets were perceived to be equally attractive by Asian women and White women, but they were perceived as less attractive by Black women. Similarly, White targets were perceived to be equally attractive by Asian women and White women, but they were perceived as less attractive by Black women. Black targets, however, were perceived to be equally attractive by all participants. Thus, Asian women and White women reacted equivalently to the target Asian, White, and Black women. However, Black women viewed outgroup targets as less attractive than did Asian and White participants, suggesting that Black women only viewed other Black target women as relevant social comparisons, consistent with our hypotheses. Also as expected, Asian women reported both Asian women and women outside of their race (i.e., Black and White target women) as desirable, suggesting a lack of self-protective strategies (i.e., not relying on in-group comparisons).

### *Global Self-Esteem*

As shown by participants' attractiveness ratings of the mainstream standards of beauty and their ratings of the yearbook photographs, Black women were less likely than Asian women or White women to report mainstream standards as attractive or to perceive mainstream standards as relevant social comparisons. Accordingly, Black women reported greater Overall Self-Attractiveness scores, as well as more positive Self-BES scores than did Asian or White women, whose scores on these measures did not differ from each other. Thus, Black women should also be less likely than Asian women or White women to experience a drop in overall feelings of self-worth following exposure to mainstream standards of beauty. To assess the possibility that exposure to mainstream beauty standards affected self-esteem, a mixed-design ANOVA was conducted to test whether there were racial differences (between-subjects variable) between Time 1 and Time 2 Self-Esteem, which was a repeated measure. As Table 1 reveals, a significant main effect of race was found,  $F(2, 167) = 10.93$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that Asian women's ( $M = 19.5$ ) and White women's ( $M = 19.8$ ) Self-Esteem were significantly lower than Black women's Self-Esteem ( $M = 21.9$ ). These results are consistent with past findings showing that Black self-esteem is as high as, or greater than, White self-esteem (Crocker & Major, 1989; Rosenberg, 1979; Wylie, 1979). There also was a main effect of self-esteem measurement period,  $F(1, 167) = 54.99$ ,  $p < .001$ , such that all people rated themselves higher in self-esteem at time 1 (pre-exposure to the models,  $M = 21.2$ ) than at time 2 (post-exposure to the models,  $M = 19.6$ ). However, there was no interaction between participant race and Global Self-Esteem measurement period,  $F(2, 167) = .52$ , *ns*, suggesting that the exposure to models did not differentially affect participants' change in self-esteem as a function of race.

Although it was expected that exposure to mainstream beauty standards might reduce self-esteem for Asian women and White women but not Black women, resulting in a race by time interaction on self-esteem, the impact of potential upward comparisons should only adversely affect women with a relatively low sense of Body Self-Esteem (Posavac et al., 1998). Thus an interaction between participant race and Self-BES in predicting self-esteem following exposure to the models was expected. Accordingly, an interaction regression analysis regressing self-BES, race (a contrast coded vector comparing Asians and Whites to Blacks) and their interaction on self-esteem at Time 2 was conducted.<sup>2</sup> The results indicated that there was a significant interaction between Self-BES and the race vector, such that Asian women and White

women who felt more negatively about their own physical appearance reported lower self-esteem at Time 2 than did Black women,  $\beta = .85$ ,  $F(3, 169) = 18.59$ ,  $p < .05$ . Follow-up analyses indicated that the regression slope for Self-BES in predicting Time 2 self-esteem was nonsignificant for Black women,  $\beta = .18$ ,  $F(1, 166) = 1.73$ , *ns*. However, there was a significant positive relationship between Self-BES and Time 2 self-esteem for Asian women,  $\beta = .66$ ,  $F(1, 166) = 33.62$ ,  $p < .001$ , and for White women,  $\beta = .29$ ,  $F(1, 166) = 5.64$ ,  $p < .01$ . These results are consistent with our predictions.

### *Conformity*

Because conformity to cultural norms should increase adherence to mainstream standards of beauty and its attendant consequences, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine if there were race differences in participants' need for conformity scores. Indeed, there was a main effect of race,  $F(2, 167) = 10.13$ ,  $p < .001$ . Consistent with our hypotheses, Black women reported the lowest need for conformity, whereas Asian women showed the highest need for conformity, exhibiting scores that even exceeded White women's need for conformity. These results suggest that Asian women are more likely than Black women, and even White women, to value conforming to mainstream ideals.

### *Actual and Ideal Selves*

Because Asian women were more conforming than were Black women and White women, it was expected that Asian women should report a greater magnitude of discrepancies (i.e., mismatches) between their actual and ideal selves in terms of physical characteristics than either Black women or White women. In fact, for Asians, but not for Blacks or Whites, mismatches were positively correlated with need for conformity scores,  $r(53) = .34$ ,  $p < .05$ . A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if there were race differences for actual-ideal mismatches. Indeed, there was a main effect of race,  $F(2, 167) = 3.90$ ,  $p < .05$ . As predicted and shown in Table 1, all three groups differed from each other in terms of mismatches generated, with Black women generating the least amount of mismatches and Asian women generating the most mismatches.

## **Discussion**

The findings from this study indicate that Black women and Asian women, although both racial minorities, respond differently to mainstream standards of beauty. As predicted, although Black women may employ self-protective strategies while comparing themselves to mainstream standards of beauty, such as identifying with in-group standards (Crocker & Major, 1989), Asian women were less likely to utilize such strategies. Instead, Asian women appeared to adopt non-ingroup, mainstream beauty ideals.

As indicated by participants' ratings of the models and of the yearbook photographs, it seems that Black women did not find mainstream ideals of beauty as relevant social comparisons and only compared themselves to Black in-group standards. Conversely, Asian women differed from Black women and found mainstream targets and women from racial outgroups to be very attractive, similar to White women. Taken together, these results suggest that Asian women adopt

mainstream standards and use those standards as relevant social comparisons, in direct contrast to the pattern exhibited by Black women.

Because Black women were less likely than Asian women to adopt mainstream standards, their self-esteem, both global and body specific, should be more positive overall, and it should be less adversely affected by viewing the mainstream beauty ideals (Crocker & Major, 1989). Indeed, a main effect of race was found for global self-esteem, revealing that Black women had greater self-esteem than did Asian women or White women. As noted by other researchers, self-esteem consequences of mainstream beauty ideals may be particularly strong for those who have relatively low satisfaction with their body (Posavac et al., 1998). Consistent with these predictions, after viewing mainstream beauty ideals, Asian and White women who reported less body satisfaction revealed lower self-esteem than did Black women who reported greater body satisfaction overall. Again, these data suggest that Black women did not experience aversive responses to mainstream beauty ideals, suggesting they were not relevant standards of comparison for them.

Deficits in global self-esteem following exposure to the models may also be contingent on individual differences in women's desire to imitate cultural standards of beauty. In particular, those with a greater need for conformity should be more likely to compare themselves to mainstream beauty standards, and thus, be more likely to experience lower self-esteem than those with less need to conform. This pattern was also observed. Specifically, Black women reported the lowest need for conformity whereas Asian women showed the greatest need for conformity. Accordingly, the former group showed greater self-esteem and fewer mismatches between ideal and actual selves than did the latter group.

The current work indicates that Asian women resemble White women in their desire to strive for mainstream beauty ideals. However, both Asian women and White women differ from Black women, who apparently rejected mainstream standards for their comparisons. This is consistent with other research that shows that Black women do not subscribe to the thinness ideals that are prescribed in mainstream culture (Hebl & Heatherton, 1998; Quinn & Crocker, 1998).

One must wonder why Asian women strive for mainstream beauty ideals, similar to White women, rather than rejecting them and adopting in-group standards instead, much like Black women. Although there may be several reasons for why Asian women adopt mainstream standards, perhaps one contributor is that Asians have a strong need to conform to cultural standards. As noted by Markus and Kitayama (1991), Asians may believe in an interdependence between the self and the dominant culture. Thus, they should attempt to conform to the standards prescribed by mainstream culture (see also, Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998). The findings of the current study showed that Asian women reported more desire to conform to mainstream cultural norms than Black women or even White women. Thus, Asian women may adopt mainstream beauty ideals more so than Black women because Asian women are more conforming to the dominant culture in general. This adherence to cultural norms may be especially psychologically damaging for Asian women, particularly when they strive for mainstream beauty ideals that may be difficult or even impossible to attain in terms of racial possibilities. This reality was reflected by Asian women reporting the most mismatches between their actual and ideal selves.

Consistent with predictions, Asian women reported the largest number of body self-discrepancies, whereas Black women reported the fewest body self-discrepancies. As noted by Higgins et al. (1985), greater discrepancies between actual

and ideal selves increases negative affect toward the self. Thus, even though Asian women and White women responded very similarly on several of the measures, the results indicate that Asian women experienced more mismatches than did White women. Thus, Asian women may be especially vulnerable to low self-esteem, both global and body-specific, and depression as a result of those actual and ideal mismatches (Mok, 1998).

In this study, Asian women reported poorer body image, greater body dissatisfaction, and lower self-evaluations in general than did Black women. Although Asian women's responses resembled the responses from White women, the mismatch results from the current study, as well as findings from other studies (Sue & Morishima, 1982; White & Chan, 1983), suggest that Asian women may feel even worse about themselves than White women because they may have internalized White standards of beauty, and yet, have physical features that are far from the mainstream standards. However, some minority groups such as Black women seem to reap some psychological benefits from in-group comparisons.

Although the results indicated that Black women differed from both Asian women and White women in their responses to mainstream ideals, future work should expand on the current findings. For example, this study only examined how Asian women and Black women perceive mainstream standards of beauty. Women from other ethnic groups may also respond to mainstream beauty standards in a unique and psychologically interesting manner. For example, research indicates that Hispanic women seem to accept mainstream standards of beauty, particularly thinness ideals (e.g., Crandall & Martinez, 1996), similar to Asian women. It is unclear, however, whether conformity needs underlie adherence to culture norms for Hispanic women. The current work focused on how women of one underrepresented minority group, Asian women, responded to cultural norms of attractiveness differently than women of a minority group that has received greater study and has shown less sensitivity to mainstream norms (i.e., Black women). Clearly, future research on body image satisfaction should examine many understudied groups in order to explore when common and unique psychological mechanisms influence how exposure to mainstream ideals influence women's responses.

## **Conclusions**

The findings that Black women view mainstream beauty ideals differently than do Asian women and White women, and that Asian women respond similarly to White women to mainstream beauty ideals are important. Often, social psychological research conducted examining minority issues focuses primarily on Black experience. Although understanding the Black experience is extremely important, there is a scarcity of studies that examine the experiences of other racial minority groups such as Asian Americans, Native Americans, or Hispanic Americans. Although any attempt to investigate racial minority experience should be regarded positively, it is essential that social scientists remember that there may be important moderators to social psychological phenomena that differ between races. As shown by the current study, Black women seemed to focus on in-group comparisons as suggested by the literature on stigma (Crocker & Major, 1989), whereas Asian women did not. By better understanding the psychological mechanisms involved in how people respond to social comparison situations, we can better understand the utility and limitations that various strategies afford to minority group members in the face of upward social comparisons and pervasive cultural norms.

## Notes

1. White, introductory psychology students (none of whom participated in the primary study) served as pretest participants. They were initially shown 25 photographs of women with a variety of physical features (short hair, long hair, blonde, brunette, etc.), and they rated each photograph on a 9-point scale, ranging from 1 (very unattractive) to 9 (very attractive), to indicate how attractive they found each model to be. The three photographs selected for use in the primary study were those chosen as the three most attractive. White women pretested the photographs because this study assessed how exposure to dominant mainstream (i.e., White) norms affects women.
2. A contrast coded vector comparing Asians and Whites to Blacks was used because Asians and Whites were predicted a priori to exhibit the same pattern of responses to cultural standards, but different from those of Blacks. Indeed, this prediction was borne out in the previous analyses.

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