

PROPOSAL: WORK, MARRIAGE, AND BODY MASS AMONG BLACK AND WHITE AMERICANS.

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In a joint project with Vida Maralani (Yale sociology), we examined the evidence for an “obesity penalty” with regards to socioeconomic outcomes such as wages, marriage, and family income. Rather than using the medical definition for being obese as given, we used semi-parametric methods to investigate where in the distribution of BMI the association between body mass and socioeconomic outcomes actually turns negative. We used data from two cohorts of American youth: the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth 1979 and 1997.

Our results show that the relationship between BMI and outcomes is shaped distinctively by gender, race, and context rather than by being “obese.” The patterns differ most by gender in the 1979 cohort, but by the 1997 cohort, the patterns instead differ primarily by race. Similarly, in the 1979 cohort there is little support for widely held beliefs about the greater acceptance of larger women for black Americans. By the 1997 cohort, however, there is ample evidence that the association between body mass and outcomes has dissipated for both black women and men, but much less so for whites. We find nearly no evidence supporting an “obesity penalty.” Instead, our results underscore the need for a better understanding of how body norms operate in the domains of work and marriage, differ by social group, and have changed across time as the distribution of BMI itself has shifted.

This summer, we will extend these analyses to understand the mechanisms underlying these patterns. We plan on examining differences in the marriage and work trajectories of the four race/gender groups across the two cohorts. In particular, we will look at timing of marriage, partner quality, types of jobs held, and unemployment spells. We aim to explain why white men and women have such different patterns from black Americans.

The research assistant will help us set up the marriage and work histories in the data sets and also prepare graphs and tables for the paper. The RA should know how to use Stata and be interested in learning additional Stata expertise. The RA will also help us review the background literature.