

## **INTRODUCTION**

Understanding the relationship between social ties and food practices among black and white middle class adults has the potential to address social processes that contribute to disparities in weight gain with respect to race and gender. Social scientific research clearly states that social relationships matter for health behaviors (e.g. eating habits) and outcomes (e.g. obesity). Specifically, Umberson and Montez (2010) point to the importance that quality and quantity play in shaping such processes. In this particular study I am interested in the ways in which racialized embodiment is enacted and expressed via one's interaction with their family of origin, particularly in childhood, and revealed through food practices. The motivation for this project stems from recent literature that point to the importance of paying particular attention to food practices in the context of social relationships (Neely et al. 2014).

Within the scope of this project, I use the term food practices to describe activities involving food including food choices, food memories, and preparation and eating habits. Furthermore, this project utilizes the terms social ties and social relationships interchangeably to reflect such social connections as family of origin. Understanding these processes with respect to race and social ties can lend deep insight into the mechanisms that contribute to disparities in weight gain among blacks and whites. Thus, this project merges theories of embodiment and intersectionality to examine the social processes around food practices and social ties for black and white adults between the ages of 30 and 60. This project relies on an analysis of in-depth interviews with 25 adults who reflect on health habits, social ties and food practices from their childhood onward.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This project merges theories of embodiment and intersectionality to create a nuanced framework through which to examine the relationship between social ties and food practices among middle class black and white adults. Rooted in black feminist and critical race theories, intersectionality argues that race, class, gender, sexuality, age and nation form interlocking systems that shape all aspects of social life (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2008). More specifically, Carbado and colleagues (2013) discuss intersectionality as “a method and a disposition, a heuristic and analytical tool” (303), one that has been used to examine a multitude of issues including those related to social identity, food/ways and food practices, power dynamics and legal and political systems in the U.S. and beyond (Holloway 2011; Engelhardt 2011; Williams-Forsen 2006; Kaplan 1997; Crenshaw et al. 1996). Embodiment, on the other hand, has been described as the ways in which our bodies tell tales “just as the proverbial ‘dead man’s bones;” (Krieger 2005: 350). More specifically, Krieger (2005) defines embodiment in terms of three central claims,

“(1) Bodies tell stories about-and cannot be studied divorced from—the conditions of out existence; (2) Bodies tell stories that often—but not always—match people’s stated accounts; and (3) Bodies tell stories that people cannot or will not tell, either because they are unable, forbidden, or choose not to tell,” (350).

Using Krieger’s central claims as the foundation for my use of embodiment, this project merges intersectionality and embodiment theory as a means of understanding how racialized embodiment is enacted and expressed through interactions with one’s key social relationships and revealed through food practices. Understanding the social processes of food can lead to greater insight into disparities in obesity between and within race/gender groups.

### **DATA AND METHODS**

The data for this project comes from the Relationships and Health Habits over the Life Course project that was conducted with IRB approval from the University of Texas at Austin between 2008 and 2009. Dr. Debra Umberson (PI) led this project to assess the ways that social ties influence health habits and outcomes over the life course. Specifically, the 60 semi-structured interviews with an equal number of black and white women and men between the ages of 25 and 84 were conducted utilizing various methods. Respondents were recruited via snowball sampling techniques, posted flyers in location and professional organizations, as well as through email listservs. Below I detail that analytic sample that will be used for this particular study as well as my analytic strategy.

#### *Analytic Sample Composition*

The sample for this particular project consists of 25 in-depth interviews with college-educated black and white adults between 30 and 60 years, reducing the original sample by 35 interviews. On average, these interviews lasted for 1.5 hours, and consisted of open-ended questions conducted in a location chosen by the respondent. The original sample consisted of (15) black women, (15) black men, (15) white women, and (15) white men between the ages of 25 and 89. From this original sample, only 25 adults between 30 and 60 had earned a college degree. In this sample of 25 black and white adults there are (12) black women, (3) black men, (6) white women, and (6) white men with an average age of 44 years old. Within the sample, the black men are the oldest with an average age of 52, followed by black women with a mean age of 47, white women with an average age of 41 and lastly by the white men who had an average of 39. Within this sample, all of the 25 had completed a college degree, while four completed a graduate degree as

well. The mean household income of this modified sample is \$56,043, with white women at the highest income at \$57,000, followed by black women and white men with \$56,666, and black men with lowest mean income at \$51,300.

### *Analytic Strategy*

General guidelines from Charmaz (2014) were used to organize the qualitative analyses of the 25 in-depth interviews by following a formal protocol for systematically analyzing data. First, I constructed a priori themes and codes based on the literature and theory that frame my larger dissertation project. For instance, themes included sharing food, using food for comfort and food memories. Next, I hand coded five randomly selected interview transcripts, compared and contrasted new codes, made necessary adjustments and compiled a list of new codes for each emerging themes. The remaining interviews were coded using NVivo software and Microsoft word.

### **ANTICIPATED FINDINGS**

This project analyzes in-depth interviews with 25 college-educated, black and white, women and men in an effort gain deeper insight into processes of racialized embodiment, family of origin and food practices. Previous research on social relationships and food practices has noted that differences occur in terms of one's racial identity (Appadurai 1988), and gender (Counihan and Kaplan 1998). By merging intersectionality and embodiment theories, this project aims to build on previous research by providing a nuanced approached to the study of social ties and food practices. With respect to the interviews that have been analyzed thus far, one of the major themes around family of origin and food practices has been the connection to the intergenerational transmission of attitudes towards food and the resulting consequences. For instance, Karen, a 42-year old black woman reflects on eating habits that she learned within the context of her family of origin notes,

“Maybe the eating. I love to eat. But I did realize early on that I can't just eat everything. And I learned that I have to exercise because heaviness runs in my family on both sides. And I learned early on to exercise to stay in shape and not be where they [her parents] are. And I kind of lost sight of that somewhere. But I wouldn't necessarily blame it on or contribute it to my upbringing.”

Karen recognizes that while certain behaviors were learned within the context of her family, that as an adult her decisions are ultimately her own, particularly because she has always viewed herself as “different” than everybody else in her family. Karen states, “I was the one who wanted to venture out. I don't want to live here [Michigan]. And I tell them all the time you guys need to

come out of Michigan.” Karen’s narrative, like several of the others, gives us a window into the social processes that shape long lasting food practices.

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