Obesity and Nonrelationship Sex: Are Obese Young Adults Hooking Up?

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Background

- A recent change that is occurring among young adults is the rise of the "hook up" culture (Armstrong 2010).
- It is estimated that 40% of young adults report ever hooking up in their lifetime (Quinn et al. 2013).
- The prevalence rate of obesity has also increased dramatically over the past thirty years among young adults.
- Current estimates reveal that 30.75% of young adults aged 20 to 39 years old are obese (Flegal et al. 2010).

Prior Research

- Research has demonstrated that obese individuals are less likely to form romantic relationships than their thinner peers, but the association between obesity and sexual activity is less clear.
- Few studies have addressed whether obesity is associated with the frequency of sex within a romantic relationship only. Other studies, however, suggest obesity does not significantly affect engaging in sex (Cayne et al. 2008).

The Present Study

- This study examines the association between obesity and the frequency of hooking up.
- It extends previous research on the association between obesity and sexual activity by considering hooking up as an independent behavior. The current study also puts partial emphasis on gender and race differences in the association of obesity and hooking up.

Competing Hypotheses

- First, obese individuals may be less likely to engage in sexual activity than their thinner peers, regardless of relationship status because the bias in attitudes of attractiveness and sexuality (Regan 2009).
- Second, obese individuals may be more likely than their thinner counterparts to engage in nonromantic sexual activity given obese individuals are less likely to form romantic relationships than their thinner counterparts (Malkhosraypy et al. 2006; Giesey et al. 2006; Stellar et al. 2008).

Data and Sample

- Data come from:
  - National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health)
  - Wave IV in-home core sample
- Analytic sample is restricted to respondents who reported valid responses on the dependent variable, not underweight, between the ages of 24 and 32, not pregnant, and valid self-reported weight and height measures.

Measures

- Dependent variable:
  - One variable is used to measure hooking up. Respondents are asked, "Considering all types of sexual activity, with how many partners, male or female, have you, ever had sex one or only one occasion?"

Independent variables:

- Stigma and discrimination: various measures of the stigma and discrimination that obese individuals experience, in turn, can have negative implications for union formation and sexual activity.
- Current estimates reveal that 30.75% of young adults aged 20 to 39 years old are obese (Flegal et al. 2010).
- Although obesity is increasingly common in young adulthood, obese individuals are still stigmatized and targets of discrimination (Pull and Browne 2001; Browne et al. 2004).
- The stigma and discrimination that obese individuals experience, in turn, can have negative implications for union formation and sexual activity.

Body Weight and Hooking Up among Young Adults

Figure 1. Frequency of Hooking Up among Young Adults, by Body Mass Index (BMI)

Predicting Hooking Up among Young Adults

Figure 2A. Odds of Hooking Up Five or More Times Compared to Hooking Up Less than Five Times

Conclusions

- Consistent with the stigma of obesity argument, the odds of hooking up five or more times compared to hooking up less than five times for young adults who are overweight (25-29.9) are 1.21 times greater compared to young adults who have a normal BMI (18.5-24.9).
- Consistent with the stigma of obesity argument, the odds of hooking up five or more times compared to hooking up less than five times for young adults who are overweight (25-29.9) and obese II (35-39.9) are 1.17 and 1.32 times greater compared to odds for young adults with a normal BMI (18.5-24.9).
- For young adult women who are obese II, the odds of hooking up five or more times compared to hooking up less than five times for young adult women who are overweight (25-29.9) and obese II (35-39.9) are 1.64 and 1.66 times greater compared to odds for white young adults who are obese II.
- For black young adults who are obese, the odds of hooking up five or more times compared to hooking up less than five times for young adults who are overweight (25-29.9) and obese II (35-39.9) are 1.56 and 1.61 times greater compared to odds for white young adults who are obese II.
- For Hispanic young adults who are overweight (25-29.9), obese II (35-39.9), and obese III (≥40) the odds of hooking up five or more times compared to hooking up less than five times are 1.28, 1.49, and 1.15, respectively, greater than the odds for their relative white counterparts for each BMI cutoff.