

## “Do Real Women Have Curves?” Paradoxical Body Images among Latinas in New York City

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**Abstract** This paper examines Latinas’ assessments of their individual body shape and weight vis-à-vis their beliefs and attitudes regarding mainstream and alternative body images. A mixed method data collection system was used based on individual instruments and focus group guidelines. While individual measures revealed participants’ preference for thinner body types than what they actually considered themselves to be, group data underscore contradictory body paradigms, defined as Latinas’ Paradoxical Body Images (LAPABI). Findings suggest the prevalence of a mainstream stereotype represented by the fit/thin White woman as the ultimate body ideal, along with the Latina curvy shape as its

counter-image. The paper further discusses the importance of the media, and of divergent cultural values, in supporting these co-existing body ideals, as well as the need for more studies addressing their combined effect on Latinas’ obesity patterns and their weight-control efforts.

**Keywords** Latinas and Hispanic women · Body Image · Body shape · Weight control · Obesity

### Introduction: Underscoring Latinas’ Curves

In the 2002 film *Real Women Have Curves*, Ana (portrayed by actress America Ferrera) is an 18-year-old-Latina youngster, who is eager to keep her conspicuously curvy body as an act of rebellion against the thin ideals of womanhood, which her surrounding milieu impinges upon her [1]. The film portrays the protagonist’s counter-image as a self-defiant young woman who boldly confronts conventional ideals of beauty and femininity. The media attention that this movie attracted when it was first released was not fortuitous. Certainly, the film awoke social anxieties regarding Latinas’ gender roles and body images along with counter-cultural commands that defy mainstream norms.

Contrary to what the actress America Ferrera would do later on in the sitcom *Ugly Betty*, in which her character undergoes a progressive metamorphosis from a supposed overweighted “ugly duckling” into a swan, Ana will not comply with the norm to shed her extra pounds. And although she refuses to obey the “thin” and “slim” mandate, she does choose a path to mainstream success. From where she stands, Ana firmly claims her *Latinidad* (Latinness) not necessarily as a counter-normative act but as a symbolic acceptance of American ideals of personal achievement. At the end of the movie, she moves to New

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York City to start college at Columbia University thanks to a well-deserved fellowship. Ana's farewell also leaves us to wonder about her future with the cute *White* guy in the story who, as it would become clear throughout the movie, not only did fall for Ana's spikey personality and determination but also for her *curves*. The underlying moral is of a Latino heroine conflicted by cultural norms (i.e., getting married as an ultimate heterosexual female ideal), unattainable models of femininity as promoted by conventional media, a drive to succeed intellectually, and the difficulties she encounters to navigate among all of them.

If, in the film, the stand taken by Ana to keep (and defend) her body shape and weight goes along with an ethnic *aggiornated* feminist assertion, in the real world her extra pounds are metonymies of a less optimistic reality. By the time the film was released, Latinos or Hispanics (these terms are used interchangeably here) had already become the largest minority in the United States. In recent years, Latinas/os have experienced the greatest increase in obesity prevalence of any population subgroups, with Latinas having higher obesity prevalence than their non-Hispanic white female counterparts [2–4]. New health problems have made them major protagonists in rising chronic disease rates including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, cancer, cerebrovascular disease (stroke), and premature death [5, 6].

In this article, we examine Latinas' assessment of their actual and desired body shapes and weight vis-à-vis their beliefs regarding mainstream and alternative body images. Body image is usually defined as the way people perceive weight, body size and appearance [7]. As noted in the literature [8, 9] body image is a complex and multifaceted construct, and therefore most research has narrowed its dimensions to body dissatisfaction and body image distortions. Research shows an association between body dissatisfaction and distorted body images as predictors of obesity and eating disorders, including binge eating, excessive laxative use, cessation of all eating, and purging patterns across ethnic groups [10–16]. In addition, the effects of body image and body dissatisfaction on eating habits and disorders may go in opposite directions. In fact, distorted body images may make women believe that they are thinner than they really are, a faulty perception that can lead to underestimating weight-gain, and which has been associated with higher rates of obesity among Black women [17]. Distortions in body image may also do the reverse by leading women to obsess over being fat, even when they are not, a pattern more typically found among White women suffering from eating disorders particularly anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

Until recently, most work on body image had been conducted among Whites, with Blacks and Hispanics usually being comparison groups (see Lovejoy for a critique [18]). Studies on weight concerns and body image have traditionally

underreported the prevalence of eating disorders among minorities in general, and women of color in particular, with findings on White women often generalized to all women [19–21]. As noted in the literature, the myth of White, upper- and middle-class women as the only group suffering from body image dissatisfaction and eating disturbances is still prevalent in our society, in spite of evidence to the contrary [22–25]. In addition, studies that do include Latinas generally sample young women with Latinas over age 35 being neglected [7].

The rising trend in overweight among minority women has prompted innovative studies on body image and body mass index (BMI) across ethnic groups [26]. This promising body of research has looked at the weight and eating habits of diverse ethnic minorities in the US to counteract the limitations of previous studies that only studied White–Black comparisons [9, 27]. This literature has addressed the impact of acculturative stress in predicting body dissatisfaction and bulimic symptoms [28], as well as the relationship between body image and health outcomes, such as depression and eating disorders among Latinas [29]. Yet, researchers still struggle to understand the specific factors that impinge on minority women's distorted body images and weight concerns [11, 30], including the pressures Latinas experience from a competitive and individualistic job market versus traditional family norms [9, 31].

In this article, we utilize a mixed research methodology, which combines individual instruments and group guidelines, to examine some of the complex beliefs systems underlying Latinas' ideas and attitudes regarding body image, weight, and shape. We particularly explore conflicting body paradigms in tune with discordant female types shaped by the media and by Latinas' dissimilar cultural frameworks (e.g., the US versus their culture of origin). In the end, we coin the term *Latinas' Paradoxical Body Images* (LAPABI) to refer to the tensions that permeate Latinas' contradictory body ideals, a fact that calls attention to growing obesity trends and the rise of eating disorders, mostly bulimia and anorexia, in this population. We now turn to the findings drawn from the analysis of the literature on Latinas and body image.

### Uncovering Body Paradoxes

The literature reports conflicting findings regarding Latinas' body image and body satisfaction. One stream of research suggests that Latinas are more accepting of heavier female figures, and thus suffer from less body dissatisfaction than do white women [13, 32]. In fact, body dissatisfaction and low body esteem have been found to be higher among White women than among Latinas and other ethnic minority women [13, 33]. Proponents of this trend argue that cultural differences in self-perception of obesity/

overweight help explain variations in obesity prevalence across populations. Non-Euro-American cultures of origin are assumed to not be fixated with ultra thin ideals, and therefore able to provide individuals with more realistic options of physical types [11]. Consequently, minorities in the US would supposedly be less concerned with body image and feel more attracted to larger silhouettes than whites [34]. These findings are supported by the underlying notion of ethnic protective factors, including specific cultural traits, which would keep Latinas from becoming vulnerable to mainstream values [34]. Protective cultural factors specifically include appreciation of a physiologically healthy body-size, stable family and social structures, and emphasis more on personality than on physical appearance [11, 24, 35, 36]. For example, a study on the impact of young Cuban women's eating disorders found that close ties with the Cuban community and culture, including primary use of Spanish language at home and frequent consumption of Cuban meals, were associated with lower and less problematic scores on the Eating Attitudes Test [37].

A very different line of research argues that Latinas face similar, if not greater, concerns regarding body image, low self-esteem, body shame, and fear of weight gain than their White counterparts [38, 39], with studies reporting comparable levels of weight concern and body dissatisfaction in both populations [29, 34]. Goodman [40] found that Latinas present greater body satisfaction than do White women, but equal levels of eating disorders. Cachelin and colleagues [2] noted that after controlling for age, BMI, and education, Latinas, and White women suffered similar levels of body discrepancy. In a study on body image attitudes among Guatemala-American women and their White female counterparts, Franco and Herrera [41] found that although the former group stated more positive attitudes toward obesity, they reported greater body dissatisfaction than did the latter group. Age and degree of acculturation stress also appear to be related to Latinas' distorted body images with second-generation Latina women, who are also less susceptible to cultural protective factors, being more stressed about weight than their first-generation peers [42].

Researchers also argue that higher prevalence of obesity/overweight in Latinas has led to the faulty perception that Hispanic culture is more tolerant of heavy figures, although Latinas actually experience similar body image problems to their White peers [2, 38]. Similarly, Root [24] notes that the impact of pervasive racism may preclude early diagnosis of eating disorders among women of color. In sum, despite the fact that Latinas face a disproportionate burden from obesity, the interaction of obesity/overweight prevalence and body image is less apparent. While some studies conclude that Latinas are closer to White women in terms of ascribing to ultra-thin Caucasian norms, research has underscored the cultural protective effect that pinpoints

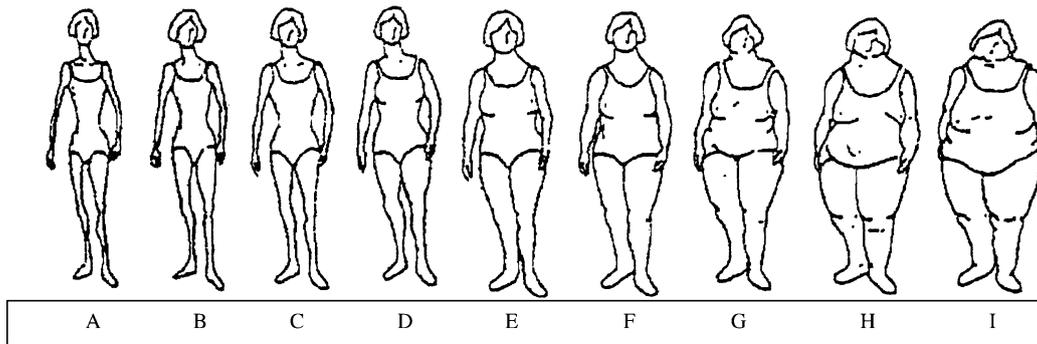
Latinas' acceptance of more sizeable curvy ideals. In the following pages, we uncover some of the possible roots of these intriguing, albeit conflicting, research findings.

## Study Design and Methods

Six focus groups of Latinas were conducted in New York City, between late Summer 2006 and early Spring 2007. Study participants were recruited through flyers posted at local churches, grocery stores, health clubs and e-mail bulletin boards, as well as through word-of-mouth. All sessions were held in private classrooms located in public educational facilities in the neighborhood of Washington Heights, in upper Manhattan, to which all women had easy access. Individual questionnaires were filled out at the beginning of the session to collect women's self-reported weight and height; basic sociodemographic characteristics, such as age, education, income and marital status; and body shape-related questions. The body shape rating scale consisted of nine female silhouettes ranging from very thin (1.0) to very heavy (9.0), and was used to assess the following four items: (1) the participant's current size and shape, (2) the size and shape the participant would most like to be, (3) the size and shape that the participant feels is most attractive, and (4) the size and shape the participant feels that men find the most attractive (see Fig. 1). These measures estimated whether body satisfaction in Latina women varied as a factor of their BMI and level of physical activity.

The focus group interviews were divided in two sections. The first addressed participants' cultural and personal factors related to their perceptions of body weight and shape, including their body satisfaction vis-à-vis their weight control efforts. Specific themes included women's concerns about gaining weight, their strategies to keep an optimal weight, their perceived gender and ethnic differences in terms of body shape and optimal weight, women's past and present experiences with weight control, and their perceived obstacles to maintaining an optimal weight. The second part of the group interview addressed participants' beliefs and practices regarding physical activity, including their motivations to be physical active and the barriers they experienced to engaging in regular physical activity (e.g., structural, cultural, and personal).

This project received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Hunter College and participants signed a consent form and were compensated for their time. All sessions were conducted in English and were led by team members with experience in facilitating focus group interviews. Each session lasted approximately 1.5–2 h and was tape-recorded for later transcription and content analysis. Individual questionnaire data were entered into Excel before being exported to SPSS for analysis. ANOVA and *t*-



Which of the above figure drawings best represents:

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Your current size and shape?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. The size and shape you would most like to be?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The size and shape you feel is most attractive?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. The size and shape you feel men in general find most attractive?

**Fig. 1** Body shape scale

tests were performed to test group significance at  $P < 0.05$  level. Focus group data were transcribed, entered as text, and then coded using QSR NVivo software. Focus group transcripts were carefully analyzed by two researchers on the team who identified recurrent themes, both within and across groups. Detailed codes were organized along four general categories that included: women’s concerns about gaining weight, external pressures to keep an optimal weight (media and family), body and weight satisfaction, and main paradigms influencing body size and shape.

**Study Findings: Quantitative Results**

A total number of 44 women participated in the focus groups. Seventy percent of the study participants were foreign born, with a majority from the Dominican Republic (47.7%, see Table 1). The average age was 38.7 years old and almost 90% had completed some college or above. In addition, the mean BMI was 27.5 kg/m<sup>2</sup>, with approximately 55% being overweight or obese. Analysis revealed significantly heavier mean scores for participants’ current body size (4.4 ± 1.3) as compared to their desired shape (3.1 ± 0.8), the shape they believed to be most attractive (2.9 ± 0.7), and the shape thought to be most attractive to men (2.8 ± 0.9). Table 2 shows the results of body shape scores by BMI patterns.

Results indicate a self-identification with higher current body size among obese women compared with overweight and normal weight participants. Findings also revealed a

**Table 1** Participant demographic results

Category	Sample (n)	Percent (%)
Foreign born	31	70.5
Dominican Republic	21	47.7
Mexico	2	4.5
Other	8	18.2
Born in US	13	29.5
Age (Mean 38.7 ± 10.7)		
Age 18–30	13	31.7
Age 31–45	15	36.6
Age 46 plus	13	31.7
Education level		
Completed high school	4	9.3
Completed college	30	69.8
College plus	9	20.9
Marital status		
Married	9	20.5
Single	21	47.7
Other	14	31.8
Income level		
Less than \$25,000	11	25.6
\$25,000–50,000	20	46.5
More than \$50,000	12	27.9
BMI (Mean 27.5 ± 7.0)		
Normal	19	45.2
Overweight	12	28.6
Obese	11	26.2

**Table 2** Participants mean body shape scores by body mass index

BMI	BS 1	BS 2	BS 3	BS 4
Normal weight	3.5 ( $\pm 0.8$ )	2.7 ( $\pm 0.6$ )	2.7 ( $\pm 0.7$ )	2.9 ( $\pm 0.9$ )
Overweight	4.8 ( $\pm 1.0$ )	3.1 ( $\pm 0.6$ )	2.8 ( $\pm 0.7$ )	2.7 ( $\pm 0.8$ )
Obese	5.7 ( $\pm 1.0$ )	3.9 ( $\pm 0.7$ )	3.4 ( $\pm 0.7$ )	2.8 ( $\pm 1.1$ )

statistical variation in body shape rankings between normal weight (BMI < 25) and obese (BMI  $\geq$  30) participants, and between overweight (BMI 25–29) and obese participants. Normal and overweight women wanted to be slimmer and felt that a slimmer figure is more attractive than did the obese women. Also, normal and overweight women preferred smaller shapes and felt that a slimmer figure is more attractive than did obese women. Interestingly, women of all three-weight categories shared a similar view point of the body shape most appealing to men; they all thought that a slim body size (with a score of about 3 on the body shape scale) is most attractive to them. Those who participated in monthly or yearly (infrequent) vigorous exercise reported statistically thinner current and desired body shapes, than did those who did not know or did not answer.

### Qualitative Assessments of the Impact of Media Images

In agreement with the quantitative results that suggest participants' overall desire to be thinner, women's remarks about body image and their weight-control efforts spontaneously emerged during the group interviews, even before specific questions were addressed. When asked about the reasons for women wanting to control their weight, participants from all groups stressed the role of the media in influencing their attempts to look good, along with the concomitant pressure to fit to mainstream standards. Although generally participants acknowledged the unrealistic expectations set by media images of ultra-thin women, most conveyed that these representations exerted an omnipresent pressure to judge their own weight and shape, along with their on-and-off efforts to lose weight. The ultimate social stereotype was summarized in being thin, tall and White. In participants' own words:

Participant 1, group 2: I think the media has an immense part to do with it. I mean, on TV and in the magazines and what you see is these thin women, you know, it's the same thing over and over. On TV and shows it's the same thing, it's the same look, it's the same size...

Moderator: Regardless of race and ethnicity?

Participant 1: Oh now, I mean, it's usually White, it's usually thin, it's usually bigger chested, bigger breasts... Like that's constantly what you see on TV shows. So if you see that, I mean Barbie, HELLO! Like Barbie alone, you know, that's what little girls always want [these]

Barbies. And they always want the White Barbie with the blue eyes and blonde hair, and none of them like the darker Barbie! So it's something that girls see from the very beginning and it's almost near impossible to control because, what are you gonna do? I mean, you have little kids watching TV all the time...

Moderator, group 1: So you agree that those models you get from magazines...

Participant 1: Oh yeah! They put a lot of pressure.

Participant 2: On *Desperate Housewives*, they are so skinny I mean..."

Participant 1: They are desperate because they are hungry!

Participant 2: Yeah I know.

A second aspect that emerged from the focus group data relates to the ubiquitous nature of the "American" type, usually defined as the White models that sell in magazines and TV shows.

Moderator, group 2: What is the American type?

Participant: Skinny, big breasts. You know your thighs are supposed to be smaller than your top, and very, very skinny as opposed to a lot of the Latina women you know. Your thighs are kind of shaped bigger than the top of your body and that kind of thing

Although participants acknowledged the impact of the thin ideal on how women judged themselves compared to others, most appeared to be conspicuously aware of the distortion between media and reality. We now turn to the analysis of curvier body ideals that also emerged from the focus group data.

### From Coca-Cola Shaped Gals to Shrinking Violets: The Rise of *Latinidad*

In spite of mainstream images that privilege thin women as the ideal to be sought, most participants acknowledged that slowly, but increasingly, alternative body types have been capturing the public imagination. Not surprisingly, the rising visibility of Latinas in public media has corresponded to the increasing typecasting of rounded beauties, Jennifer Lopez (J-Lo) being a case in point. Only a few years ago, her prodigious backside catapulted her rise to stardom, and what she called a "guitar body" became the counter-stereotype of her less endowed American peers [43]. Some participants specifically referred to J-Lo as the counter-stereotype that has recently opened new spaces for alternative body types in public media:

Participant 1, group 4:

That's really changed though [referring to the slim norm]. I guess it's kind of like it started with J-Lo

because she's in the mainstream and look at her: she obviously has hips! So now you're seeing, like... It's weird: you start to see Caucasian and Asian girls that now are going to the gym to work it out [their butts]. They even have butt implants. They're willing to go buy what they didn't want before. That used to be discriminated against!

A remarkable discrepancy emerged from the way in which women saw themselves versus how they thought men wanted them to be. As noted earlier, results from the body shape rating scale indicated that most participants (regardless of body weight) believed that men preferred a very thin body type. However, focus group data revealed an overall belief that Latino men like curvier types. In fact, most participants noted that Latino men like women "who have shape" and "curves" rather than thin ones. One participant even explained that men's disparate preferences would lead her to change her body weight and shape accordingly:

Participant, group 5: We control ourselves to look better for them [men]. I think. I'll just say quickly that I'm small and I get more attention from White men and if I'm thicker I get more attention from Latino darker men. So it's like... Well, do I want to be with a White man now or do I want to be with a Latino? When I stopped growing, and I stopped growing at 5'4", I reached 181 pounds and I was much, much thicker and it was like: Oh! The guys used to love it! I mean the Latino darker males. I have dated Asian males, but I find that the White males like me to be small and I seem to attract more [of them] if I'm really skinny. I do find a difference in the way I'm treated and it's like with whoever I end up with, I have to kind of think: 'Okay, how do they need me and what they're attracted to, and how can I perpetuate that?' So, if I met you in a much heavier state and you seemed to like that, then I try to be that for you....

Alternative body ideals also emerged when participants reflected upon mainstream media images vis-à-vis different body types being more acceptable in their cultures of origin. Participants marked a clear distinction between Caucasian/White body types and the Latina body shape, graphically symbolized by the "apple" White figure versus the "pear-shaped" Latina type:

Participant 1, group 6: Another thing that's different from Caucasians. I think Latinas, yes, they eat a lot of things but they're more flexible with their curves. You can be thin but there needs to be curves there. But I think Caucasians like Kate Moss, which is like a thin rail, and it's straight... And my friends... they don't want to look like that. They don't want to look like a supermodel with no curves.

Moderator, group 6: As Hispanic women the norm is what?

Participant 3: Curves. A pear-shaped woman. Yeah, it's funny because I was with a friend of mine and she was getting her wedding dress put on, and me and another one were looking at this woman, Caucasian. She looked so good in her dress because she had curves, and me and my friend were commenting on it. She couldn't hear us but the first thing she complained about was: 'Oh my God: look at these hips!' And me and my friend told her: 'Are you kidding me? We were just talking about how good you look in that dress because you have hips.' I think for us, it's to our advantage. It's like curves are a good thing. Like it's not necessarily a horror.

Indeed, and despite of the acceptance of the "thin norm," participants acknowledged the increasing recognition of alternative body types, including the pear-shaped type:

Participant 4, group 2: You know I have friends who are Latina, I have friends who are White... but when it comes to my Latina friends, you know: Yeah! They have curves! And she's like: Yes, I'm shapely... When it comes to my friends that are White, they are always trying to hide certain things when they go to clubs, and they don't dance. At least that's what comes to the way they use their body, this is what I've seen....

Participant 1, group 3: And you must have all heard about the Dove program, how the Dove commercials [show] about true beauty. And it says basically like: what's beautiful for you is not beautiful for me. You know, and it's all about kind of like self-image and stuff. I actually have the privilege to meet with them and to talk to them about it, because I was planning this thing for them to come to the school to talk to girls and to talk to guys.

### Discussion: Narrowing the Gap Between Contradictory Findings

Among study participants, contradictory body images seem to be alive as well. While most reflected on the general pressure they feel to stay thin, they also contested this norm by pointing out Latinas' preferences for curvier types. And although participants acknowledged the pervasive influence of mainstream ideas that privilege slim and thin types, they also challenged those paradigms by subscribing to curvier body types and by opposing the idea that one size-fits-all. These results draw attention to the "double-edge" that many Latina women must deal with, as they endure a

conventional culture that privileges excessive thinness vis-à-vis alternative messages that promote full-rounded bodies. These results concord with the conflicting findings reported by the literature reviewed earlier. Indeed, although participants showed discordance with their actual body shape compared to what they would like to be, they supported counter paradigms more permissive of fuller body types [20, 44].

Against simplified bicultural notions that place Latinas amidst two opposed cultural domains (mainstream American norms versus the culture of origin), our research has underscored a more comprehensive picture. On the one hand, mainstream Latina images comply with an Anglo type of beauty; while on the other, subaltern cultural streams are channeled via voluptuous icons more in tune with *real* women in *real life*. We argue that these contradictions are a reflection of overlapping social and cultural constructs that pervade Latina ideals in society. These results are also consistent with growing research that shows that alternative media messages portray a broader span of Latinas' images including fuller bodies and larger sizes [7, 40]. Our findings also accord with a large body of literature that points out the power of western values, and particularly the media, in setting unrealistic slender standards leading to body dissatisfaction [8, 45]. Among Latinas/os, cultural frameworks that associate being healthy with having a curvy shape appear to be dissonant with a media culture obsessed with images of abnormal thin models [24, 46].

Nevertheless, our findings do not explain to what extent the conflicting body paradigms presented above influence women to either lose or gain weight. As noted earlier, the mainstream command to stay thin could actually be counter-effective in helping women to keep a normal weight by setting impossible standards. At the same time, the cultural acceptance of curvier body types could help encourage (and justify) women's overweight and obesity trends. Cultural factors that may protect some groups may become a risk factor for others, as it has been found among African Americans whose positive body image correlate with high obesity prevalence [18]. In other words, being curvy is not necessarily synonymous with being healthy. In one of our participant's words: "I think what we Latinas don't realize is that you can be curvy and thick and full versus just being curvy because you are overweight or gaining weight" (participant 1, group 6).

In sum, being curvy but not fat may be a path for some, but the fine line between the two is not easily drawn either by those who carefully study this tension or by the women who experience it. And, although there is no conclusive evidence on the mechanisms through which media images influence women's body satisfaction and

eating behaviors, studies consistently report a strong correlation between the two [8, 47]. Finally, and despite the fact that mainstream media have steadily become more inclusive of Latinas and Latinos, these remain the most underrepresented segment in non-Spanish language mass media and the most under-represented population among major minority groups in the US magazine advertisement [7, 48].

## Conclusions and Future Steps: Beyond Body Paradoxes

The findings presented here provide firsthand glimpses into Latinas' beliefs regarding body image, including differences between what is considered expected and possible. As revealed by the quantitative data, all participants reported a preference for thinner body types than what they actually considered themselves to be. Although overweight and obese women were more lenient toward bigger body types, all women were conspicuously aware of the mainstream American norm that privilege thinner body types as the predicament to which women should subscribe. Nevertheless, our qualitative analysis also shows that participants acknowledged the acceptance of heavier and curvier body types, in accordance with Latino/a paradigms that are more in tune with fuller shapes. These results also suggest how different (and even contradictory) body ideals can co-exist among Latinas. In the end, our coining of the term LAPABI has turned into a working hypothesis that will be the focus of future research and testing.

Still, what we know about the relationship between body image and body satisfaction among Latinas is far from conclusive. Further quantitative and in-depth qualitative work should focus on the multiplicity of Latinas' experiences in the United States, while including multi-dimensional frameworks to encompass the role of race/ethnicity, class and social status, national origin, migratory histories (first and second generation), and sexual orientation. Conspicuously, although the social sciences and health literature have consistently reported a relationship between social class (SES) and body type [49], most studies overlook SES as a determinant of intra- and inter-racial and ethnic differences. Unless differences in SES are taken into account, research cannot conclude that disparities in body-size preferences are solely based on ethnic differences [2, 9]. More work is also needed on the cultural protective factors against distorted body images and eating disorders, including media messages tailored to diverse racial/ethnic groups [11].

Health messages should challenge a uniform model of womanhood, which may have a negative impact on Latinas' efforts to control weight. The promotion of more realistic body types that are in tune with women's

differences may be more effective in targeting Latinas in the United States. To be a woman, and to become one, has different connotations among women in the United States. The film that opened this article, “*Real Women Have Curves*,” reminds us that between fiction and reality, and between what is desirable and possible, there are many different Latinas for whom subjective notions of personal beauty are drawn from multiple cultural commands, leading them to challenge their own boundaries and dare to go where no other women have gone before.

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