

Perceptions of healthy weight of Malians and Moroccans living in different geographical environments

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Objectives

Perceptions of body size can influence whether obesity is seen as desirable and therefore whether a population is motivated to change. Few studies have investigated the effect of migration and living in different environments on preferences for body size. The present study examined body size preferences and

satisfaction of adults living in urban and rural Morocco and Mali, as well as of migrants to France from these countries, to investigate if their weight status and body size preferences vary in these different geographical contexts.

Material and methods

Cross-sectional studies were conducted in Mali and Morocco (rural and urban zones) and in France of Moroccan and Malian migrants, using matched quota sampling of target samples of $n = 300$ adults. A structured interviewer-administered questionnaire was used. Height and weight were measured to calculate BMI. To estimate ideals for body size, participants associated their views with 1 of 9 silhouettes ranging from underweight to obese.

Results

Mean BMI of migrant Malians (24.9) and Moroccans (26.6) living in France was similar to that in urban Mali (24.9) and Morocco (26.5), but higher than for rural Malians (24.1) and Moroccans (25.1) ($p < 0.001$). Body satisfaction was lower for Malian and Moroccan migrants in France ($p < 0.0001$), e.g. 35.8% of Malians living in France wanted to lose weight compared with only 19.2% and 20.4% living in rural and urban Mali respectively. The trend was more marked for Moroccans in Africa, i.e. 45.9% of Moroccans living in France wanted to lose weight compared with only 20.0% and 34.4% living in rural and urban Morocco respectively. Malians and Moroccans living in France were less likely to see large body sizes as healthy, i.e. only 5.2% of Malian migrants and 3.7% of Moroccan migrants living in France believed that large body sizes are healthy, compared with rural Mali (43.3%) and Morocco (11.9%) ($p < 0.0001$). Malian and Moroccan migrants in France were less likely to associate being 'large' with success and more likely to see it as shameful, compared with those living in Africa ($p < 0.0001$).

Conclusion

There is some evidence of a transition of attitudes within Mali and Morocco, from rural to urban areas, but even stronger evidence of a shift in body size norms for Malian and Moroccan migrants to France, suggesting evidence of acculturation.

Key messages

- There is some evidence of a transition of attitudes within Mali and Morocco, from rural to urban areas.
- There is strong evidence of a shift in body size norms for Malian and Moroccan migrants to France, suggesting evidence of acculturation.