

## ZICKLIN CENTER FOR BUSINESS ETHICS RESEARCH SEMINAR SERIES

**SPEAKER:** Sonya A. Grier, Robert Wood Johnson Health & Society Scholar  
University of Pennsylvania

**TITLE:** ***Targeted Food Marketing and the Obesity Epidemic***

**DATE:** November 18, 2004 – Noon – 1:30 PM – Room 641 JMHH

*If you plan to attend and would like a lunch, please email Gale Davis at [agale@wharton.upenn.edu](mailto:agale@wharton.upenn.edu) by Friday, October 29<sup>th</sup>. You are welcome to attend without an rsvp, but lunch will not be ordered for you.*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Obesity is a critical health problem that is of special concern regarding children and ethnic minorities of all ages. While the etiology of obesity is multifactorial, the traditional prevention focus on individual behavior has shifted toward a concern with “obesogenic” or “toxic” environments that encourage the consumption of food and/or discourage physical activity. Researchers, advocates, and consumers attribute the obesity epidemic to factors such as increased availability of junk food, increased portion sizes, advertising, and fast food promotion, each of which is based on a marketing activity. While the legal and social debate surrounding the target marketing of tobacco and entertainment violence to youth has set precedents for considering the influence of marketing on health, food marketing represents a different, perhaps more challenging case.

Marketing may contribute to observed differences in the rates of obesity for specific populations, given that marketing strategies are typically ‘targeted’ to particular consumer segments. That is, members of population sub-segments may live in different “marketing environments” regarding food. This presentation is based on a critical review of literature illustrating how marketing efforts may encourage obesity and/or serves as a countervailing force for obesity prevention efforts among high-risk population segments. Specifically, the review examines two questions: 1) Does targeted food marketing to high-risk consumer segments result in exposure and access to more or less beneficial foods? 2) How might target marketing influence overeating among high-risk population segments? Results suggest that the marketing environment of consumer segments at high-risk for obesity may be dominated by energy dense, low nutritional value foods. Findings will be discussed in terms of their implications for marketing practice, conceptions of corporate social responsibility, and public policies related to target marketing and health.

### **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Sonya A. Grier is a consumer psychologist whose research converges on topics related to the social impact of commercial marketing efforts, the influence of social context on consumer response, and social marketing. She is currently spending two years at the University of Pennsylvania as a member of the first cohort of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation *Health and Society Scholars* program. The interdisciplinary fellowship is designed to build the nation's capacity for research, leadership and action to address the

broad range of social factors affecting health. Her current research investigates the relationship between marketing activities, both commercial and social, and consumer health-related attitudes, behaviors and outcomes. She is also examining the role of marketing-related public policy in addressing health disparities. Dr. Grier spent two years as a Visiting Scholar in the Bureau of Economics at the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), where she provided consumer research expertise as part of a team examining the target marketing of violent movies, music and video games to American youth. She has also been a Visiting Scholar with the Connolly Program in Business Ethics at Georgetown University, and has practical industry experience, having worked in Market Research at Kraft, Incorporated, and in Brand Management at General Foods USA. Dr. Grier received her Ph.D. in Marketing, with a minor in Social Psychology, from Northwestern University, where she also earned a Master's of Business Administration (MBA) Degree. Dr. Grier is an Assistant Professor of Marketing (on leave) at the Stanford University Graduate School of Business, where she is a faculty affiliate of the Center for Social Innovation (CSI) and the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity (CCSRE).