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Guilt by Obesity: A Closer Look at Obesity Stigmas

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Abstract

Obesity stigmas have led to an increased interest in the body-positivity movement in recent years. However, despite the decreasing discrimination and shaming of the obese, many people still consciously and unconsciously adhere to obesity stigmas and myths. These false beliefs are harmful not only to obese individuals but also to society, given that over 1/3 of the U.S. adult population is now obese (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). These stigmas can be especially harmful to obese individuals who are victims of wrongdoings and to obese individuals who are accused of a wrongdoing (Yamawaki, Riley, Rasmussen, & Cook, 2018). Much like the concept of “guilt by association,” the assumption of “guilt by obesity” ascribes guilt to someone not because of any evidence but because of their weight alone. Moreover, people who adhere to obesity stigmas often see obese individuals as being less trustworthy, having less self-control, and having less self-esteem than their thinner counterparts, but the literature does not support these views (Joslyn & Hyder-Markel, 2019). Obesity has many causes, including environmental, psychological, and genetic components (Joslyn & Hyder-Markel, 2019); thus, obesity stigmas are not an accurate depiction of every obese individual’s experience. Future research should be conducted on how to promote weight equality in the media and in social policy.

Keywords: obesity stigmas, obesity, health perceptions, bias, stigma

Tiffany is known by her friends to be intelligent, engaging, and health conscious. One day Tiffany is asked out by Eric, who is equally well liked by his friends. They go out and have a good time together. However, at the conclusion of the evening, Eric, against Tiffany's protests, sexually assaults her. Tiffany tells her roommates what had happened when she gets home and is devastated when none of her roommates believe her. As Tiffany reflects on the situation, she feels that her roommates' reason for not believing her might be related to one fact about herself: Tiffany is noticeably obese—Eric is not.

Tiffany fits the definition given by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for *obesity*, a term assigned to those whose body mass index (BMI) falls at or above 30 on the BMI scale. Over one-third of the American population is obese (CDC, 2017). Obesity is known to be correlated with a range of moderate to severe health issues, including sleep apnea, hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, strokes, and some types of cancer (Natviker, Raheim, Anderson, & Moltu, 2018). Because people consider health to be negatively related to BMI, obese individuals are stigmatized as unhealthy. Being overweight or obese is often perceived as a consequence of an unhealthy lifestyle (Natviker et al., 2018), and many people seek to control or lower their weight to decrease their risk of acquiring these diseases. Because weight is often considered controllable, many people have negative opinions of obese individuals, for example, that obese people choose to be overweight because they lack self-control or eat unhealthily. These assumptions can cause obese individuals to feel both emotional and physical pain (Joslyn & Hyder-Markel, 2019; Olson, Landers, Thaxton, & Emery, 2018). The literature shows that obesity is not a simple issue that is always within an individual's control.

Media coverage of body acceptance and body positivity has dramatically increased. Instagram sensations such as Third Love oppose the unrealistic body standards set by Victoria's Secret models (Debtor, 2019), and women are demanding plus-sized clothing and models that better reflect "real women" (Danziger, 2018). Even nationwide media acknowledges that obesity is not always a choice but can be affected by varying factors. Society has come a long

way in eradicating negative rhetoric toward overweight and obese individuals; one might even assume that weight discrimination is a thing of the past. Nation-wide media recognition of the obesity problem and acknowledgment that obesity is not always a choice but can be affected by varying factors has become increasingly common.

Despite this progress, obesity stigmas and myths still affect the implicit social judgments of others. According to Chen and Brown (2005), obese individuals, regardless of age, are subject to negative stigmatization. Teenagers report many instances of distressing obesity-related teasing from both school friends and family (Chen & Brown, 2005). Palmer and Rutland (2011) found that when shown pictures of people of varying weights, elementary school students indicated a preference to make friends with underweight students as opposed to their normal or overweight counterparts. This preference indicates that bias against obese individuals starts early in life. In addition, obese individuals in non-school settings like the workplace have been stigmatized with negative traits, including incompetence, laziness, and lack of discipline (Chen & Brown, 2005). For example, Puhl, Gold, Leudicke, and DePierre (2013) found that obese patients were negatively perceived by their healthcare workers and that, conversely, patients judged obese physicians because of their weight. Further, in a study done on social policy, the way people voted on obesity-related issues changed based on their assumptions as to why people were obese (Joslyn & Hyder-Markel, 2019). The variety of situations in which obesity discrimination occurs suggests that obesity stigmas are not confined to only one situation, age group, or place. Because of the many circumstances in which weight affects peoples' opinions of others, the obesity problem appears to be wide reaching.

Obesity stigmas can also affect how people evaluate others' innocence or guilt. While it is accepted that gender, race, and socioeconomic factors can affect one's judgment in determining another's innocence or guilt (Chin, 2018; Peirone, Maticka-Tyndale, Gbadedo, & Kerr, 2017), Puhl, Andreyeva, and Brownell (2008) found that in many cases obesity has equal or greater influence on discrimination than race, gender, and age. Furthermore, Puhl

et al. (2008) reported that weight discrimination is the third most reported form of discrimination by adult females and the fourth most reported type of discrimination by adult males (see Figure 1). Additionally, both sexes reported weight as the most common source of discrimination in the workplace, trumping both race and gender (see Figure 1). Because weight has such a strong influence on people's judgments, it has serious implications whenever an obese individual's actions are called into question. Clarke and Stermac (2011) found that a participants' adherence to obesity stigmas correlated with the blame attributed to obese victims of sexual assault because of their obesity. These stigmas are important to consider, because such discrimination can deeply affect the lives of falsely accused victims.

Obesity stigmas can also contribute to ascribing wrongdoing to innocent people. In sexual assault cases, Yamawaki, Riley, Rasmussen, and Cook (2018) found that participants' biases affected the credibility of not only an obese victim but also of the alleged obese perpetrators' credibility. According to Yamawaki et al. (2018), participants were more likely to believe that obese individuals were making up their story (if the victim) or had committed the assault (if the perpetrator). This study demonstrates a serious problem that may arise from adherence to obesity stigmas and highlights how these stigmas affect one's judgment. Despite heightened awareness of the importance of positive body image and an increased sensitivity to the negative effects of body shaming, obesity stigmas (especially those leading to assumptions of guilt among the innocent) still significantly affect personal judgments and should be eradicated, because obese people are just as capable of being trustworthy, developing healthy self-esteem, and demonstrating appropriate measures of self-control as those who appear to embody society's thin ideal.

Obesity and Trustworthiness

While some may believe that another person's weight does not affect their ability to trust that individual, weight may actually play a significant role in the evaluation of others. The common expression, "never trust a skinny chef," while based on the misconception that overweight people are better cooks than thin people (and therefore

consume more of their own food), hints at the role an individual's weight can play in societal perceptions of trustworthiness. Puhl et al. (2013) found that participants, regardless of their score on the fat-phobia scale, perceived physicians described as overweight to be less trustworthy than those described as thin. Weight affected the amount of trust patients had in their physicians, with obese physicians' recommendations being trusted less than those of a non-obese physician's recommendation (Puhl et al., 2013). According to Puhl et al., these ideas pervaded not only those who were evaluated as adhering to obesity stigmas but also by those whose fat-bias scores did not indicate they agreed to any stigmas against the obese. This suggests that those who are not aware of their biases may unconsciously adhere to obesity stigmas and that individuals may unconsciously trust an obese individual less than a thinner individual based on weight alone.

Additionally, according to Jaffer and Ma (2015), preschoolers were less likely to trust information given to them from an obese individual. This shows that, starting from a young age, individuals can form ideas that obese individuals are less trustworthy than those with a lower body weight. These unconscious stigmas can have serious effects in many unanticipated circumstances. Because the false idea that an obese individual is less trustworthy can be implicit, one may not realize why they favor one person's opinion over another's. This could be especially detrimental in a courtroom. A jury might not be aware of their own innate biases that factor into their decision to convict an innocent obese person of a crime or to not trust the testimony of an obese victim. The impact that feelings of distrust can have in legal situations is important to consider.

A possible factor reinforcing the myth that the obese are less trustworthy is the negative representations of obese people in the media. Negative portrayals of obese individuals are common in infomercials, on social media, and on television shows that pose weight loss as a "solution" to one's problems of being unattractive, unpopular, and unhappy. Researchers Blaine and McElroy (2002) observed that media often portray the obese as either unattractive or unhappy. They also found that media also portrays the obese as the

untrustworthy or evil characters (Blaine & McElroy, 2002). According to Savoy and Boxer (2019), exposure to weight-biased media increased exclusive behavior towards the obese, ultimately strengthening anti-obese feelings towards those who were obese. These negative opinions may foster less trust towards obese people and may lead to discrimination against them.

While studies demonstrating social stigmas and negative sociality against obese individuals are prevalent, they typically measure only the perceptions that others have of the obese, rather than the actual trustworthiness of the obese individuals themselves. Brañas-Garza, Espín, and Lenkei (2016) measured the trustworthiness, altruism, and fairness of individuals with low, average, and high BMI scores. By performing a series of trust and trustee games with a sample size of 835 citizens, ranging 16 to 89 years old, they found no positive correlation between BMI and the trustworthiness of individuals; obese individuals were no more likely to show untrustworthy behavior than their counterparts with a normal or underweight BMI (Brañas-Garza et al., 2016). Thus, the idea that obese individuals should be trusted less than others is unfounded. Just as society has openly addressed racial and gender discrimination and has taken steps to eliminate them (i.e., affirmative action), steps should be taken to address and eradicate obesity stigmas in order to promote equality among all people—above or below a BMI of 30.

Obesity and Self-Esteem

One of the most commonly held misconceptions about obese people is that they suffer from low self-esteem because of their weight. Self-esteem is defined as being a sum total of one's personal views of their own physical and mental characteristics, including their perception of others' views of themselves (American Psychological Association [APA], 2018). According to diagnostic tests designed to measure all aspects of self-esteem, some obese individuals do suffer from low self-esteem, especially regarding self-concept, body image, and their personal character traits (Gatta, Miscioscia, Cassutti, & Sale, 2017; Megías et al., 2018). However, not all obese participants in these studies suffered from low self-esteem related to their weight,

and not every reason for low self-esteem was related to weight. As mentioned previously, given that approximately one-third of adults in America are obese (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017), it would be inappropriate to stereotype all obese individuals as having low self-esteem. In a study performed by Bonsasken, Fagermoen, and Lerdal (2015), less than half of obese participants reported having low self-esteem. In the same study, Bonsasken et al. (2015) measured both obese and non-obese participants' levels of self-esteem, and found that the percentage of those who had low self-esteem was comparable across groups. Bonsasken et al. (2015) suggested that obese and non-obese individuals (with other health concerns) had equal levels of self-esteem because society blames both groups for their poor health without knowing the reasons behind their health issues. Because society blames these individuals, they themselves may begin to believe that they could have prevented their health conditions, often resulting in poor self-esteem and feeling discriminated against by their peers, which may further aggravate their physical and emotional health (Bonsasken et al., 2015). This example highlights some of the issues that can occur when people make assumptions about any group of people and why it is important for eliminate stereotypes. Society's views of obese individuals having low self-esteem can perpetuate those feelings in the obese people themselves.

The idea that obese people suffer from low self-esteem or are less confident than thin individuals should be invalidated. Just as it is inadvisable to assume that every member of a race has specific negative qualities, it is inappropriate to tack an assumption of low self-worth onto an entire weight group. In fact, a good example of the irrelevance of BMI on self-esteem can be observed with anorexia nervosa patients and with underweight girls who feel they are not curvy enough. Both these types of people have a low enough BMI that they may be classified as extremely underweight—and yet may still suffer from low self-esteem (Puttevils, Vanderhasselt, & Vervaet, 2019). A study performed by Puttevils et al. (2019) showed how self-esteem issues related to weight were not exclusive to the obese. Because those categorized with a BMI considered normal

or underweight may have low self-esteem, BMI cannot be the only thing that influences an individuals' level of self-esteem. Instead of overgeneralizing characteristic of self-esteem to weight, people should evaluate others' character on an individual basis after getting to know them, as they would any other person.

Obesity and Self-Control

Another common obesity myth is that individuals are obese because they lack self-control. The literature has indicated multiple perspectives on this issue. According to Brugnera et al. (2018), some individuals do gain weight because of a lack of control when eating, especially those with binge eating disorder. However, many obese individuals gain weight slowly over time (or quickly—such as in cases of pregnancy) without any noticeable moments of losing control; and many, despite strict dieting, may still have difficulty maintaining or losing weight (Brugnera et al., 2018). Stigmas of obese individuals not having self-control stem from a reductionist line of thinking: If obesity comes from excess eating and insufficient exercise then obese individuals lack self-control. It is important to consider all of the influencing factors leading to obesity and how they can affect opinions of the obese. More convincing reasons exist for an obese individual's weight gain other than having a lack of self-control when eating, such as environmental, psychological, and biological variables (Khan, Tarrant, Weston, Shah, & Farrow, 2018).

Some environmental causes of obesity include socioeconomic difficulties, lack of access to education about proper nutrition (resulting in poor food choices), and lack of time to prepare healthy foods (Pigeyre et al., 2016). With cheaper, poorer quality food, one may eat regular-sized portions and still gain weight. Many individuals with a poor education have a lower income, which can influence them to make poor food choices, leading to weight gain (Pigeyre et al., 2016). Gall et al. (2016) found that one reason why youth gained weight was because of their family's lack of education and socioeconomic status as well as the perception that they did not have enough time to prepare healthy meals.

Psychological factors are also thought to be related to weight gain and obesity. Several psychological conditions are associated with obesity, including depression, stress, and binge eating disorder (Khan et al., 2018). For example, when an individual experiences continued stress, physiological reactions occur in the body, elevating cortisol and glucocorticoid levels and changing the way the body handles influxes of fat in the diet (Razzoli, Pearson, Crow, & Bartolomucci, 2017). Strong negative emotions, such as anger or fear, were also shown to be risk factors leading to obesity (Razzoli et al., 2017). There are several possible reasons for emotions influencing weight gain including the conscious desire to relieve negative emotions as well as the physiological reaction to these emotions (Razzoli et al., 2017). Razzoli et al. (2017) also noted that individuals were more likely to overeat when experiencing induced stress or other negative emotions. Because these psychological states can affect behaviors and even physiological responses to what one eats, psychological factors should be considered to better understand possible reasons for weight gain and to reduce biases.

Genetics is also a component in obesity. Some individuals are genetically predisposed to obesity, such as those born with Prader-Willi syndrome and those with hormonal or thyroid issues (Fernandez, Klimentidis, Dulin-keita, & Casazza, 2012; Khan et al., 2018). Because science has yet to perfectly understand genetics, research is ongoing and the lines between environmental, psychological, and genetic factors in relation to obesity are often blurred. When assumptions that obese individuals are overweight because they lack self-control are made, it pushes the cause of obesity onto a behavior, often leading to the false idea that an individual's obesity is always a conscious choice.

The idea that an obese individual's lack of self-control is a conscious, controlled behavior is harmful to obese individuals in many ways. Joslyn and Hyder-Markel (2019) found that those who believed obese individuals had control over their weight were more likely to express antipathy and anger towards obese individuals and to pass weight-biased legislation. Khan et al. (2018) found similar findings: the more that participants thought an obese individual had

control over their own weight, the more the participants adhered to negative or stigmatized feelings. The implications of these studies are serious for obese individuals; depending on a person's assumed reason for another's obesity, the way that person thinks, feels, and acts in response to the obese individuals may change. These feelings may even translate into voting for or against weight-biased legislation (Joslyn & Hyder-Markel, 2019). Currently, Michigan is the only state that has passed laws to protect obese individuals from workplace hiring discrimination based on weight (Joslyn & Hyder-Markel, 2019), despite the large numbers of people who have indicated feeling discriminated against in the workplace (see Figure 1).

Conclusion

Obesity has been associated with various health issues, which has ultimately led to the formation of beliefs that obese individuals lack self-control, self-esteem, and trustworthiness (Bonsasken et al., 2015). After years of stigmatization, a movement for body positivity has successfully diminished negative conversations about obese individuals (Danziger, 2018). However, these obesity stigmas have not completely vanished—they still affect people's judgments of others. Many people espouse negative, usually subconscious ideas that obese individuals are not trustworthy (Jaffer & Ma, 2015; Puhl et al., 2013), but obese individuals have shown to be just as trustworthy as those with lower BMIs (Brañas-Garza et al., 2016). In addition, many people subscribe to the false idea that obese individuals suffer from low self-esteem; however, not all obese individuals suffer from low self-esteem. A reason why obese individuals may be perceived as having low self-esteem is the perpetuation of these negative views by society and the media (Blaine & McElroy, 2002; Bonsasken et al., 2015; Savoy & Boxer, 2019). Another common myth is that obese individuals lack self-control. One possible reason for people thinking this way may be the assumption that obesity is a conscious choice (Joslyn & Hyder-Markel, 2019; Khan et al., 2018). All three of these unfounded obesity stigmas can be very harmful to obese individuals' psyche and self-concept (Bonsasken et al., 2015). Furthermore, these prejudices against obese individuals often leak into the political sphere and

contribute to weight-biased laws (Joslyn & Hyder-Markel, 2019) Obesity stigmas should be addressed and eradicated, with new social policy reflecting the importance of weight equality.

Future research should focus on identifying factors that contribute to obesity stigmas and myths. Because of the various situations in which victims and suspects are made vulnerable when subjected to obesity stigmas, additional research should be conducted on how obesity stigmas and myths have legal implications, such as possible biases of the jury during a trial. Further, given that adherence to obesity stigmas can be implicit and can start from a young age, it may be beneficial to conduct research on how to prevent or reduce obesity myths and stigmas in the general population as well as how to promote healthy perspectives of obese individuals in the media.

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Appendix

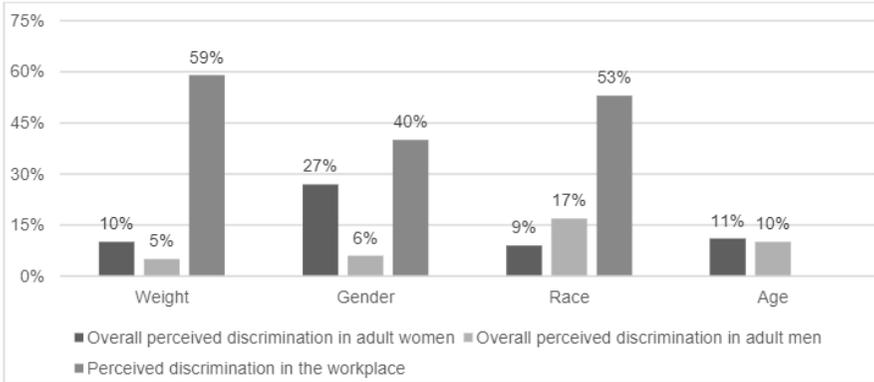


Figure 1: Graphical representation of individual's perceived discrimination received from others in day-to-day activities. The data was collected from 2,290 individuals (1104 male and 1186 female) aged 25–74. Data was taken from the 1995 and 2006 Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) surveys. The percentages indicate the individuals who reported experiencing this type of discrimination. More than gender and race, weight discrimination was the most prevalent discrimination in workplace settings. Additionally, women perceived more weight bias than men. Adapted from “Perceptions of weight discrimination: Prevalence and comparison to race and gender discrimination in America,” by R. M. Paul, T. Andreyeva, and K. D. Brownell, 2008, *International Journal of Obesity*, 32(6), pp. 992–1000.