



Bias & Discrimination Against Obese Individuals



Objectives

- Define obesity and stigma
- Describe evidence of weight bias in multiple settings
- Discuss consequences of weight stigma for obese adults and youth



What is Obesity?

According to WHO:

BMI	Classification	Health Risk
< 18.5	Underweight	Increased
18.5 – 24.9	Normal range	Average
25.0 – 29.9	Overweight	Increased
30.0 – 34.9	Obese class I	Moderate
35.0 – 39.9	Obese class II	Severe
≥ 40.0	Obese class III	Very severe



Obesity In The United States

- Up to 50% of all Americans are overweight
- Linked to coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and some types of cancer
- Estimated to cause 310,000 - 580,000 deaths and cost \$71 billion annually in health care
- If trends continues every person in the USA will be obese by 2230



Risk Factors

Female

African American

Hispanic

Age

Low SES



STIGMA OF OBESITY

STIGMA =

Negative attitudes that influence
our interpersonal interactions



Why Care about Weight Stigma?

Implicit biases may:

- reflect internalized attitudes
- bias our decisions about others
- affect our treatment of others

Bias is more than implicit

Discrimination occurs in many settings



Evidence of Weight Stigma

ANECDOTAL

CASE HISTORIES OF INDIVIDUALS

RESEARCH



Stigma in Multiple Domains

Substantial research evidence:

Employment

Education

Health care

(Puhl & Brownell, 2001)



Bias in Employment Settings

Studies have found prejudice against overweight individuals in:

- Hiring preferences
- Promotions
- Employment termination
- Wage inequities



Hiring Preferences

- Obese job applicants rated as having:
 - poor self-discipline**
 - low supervisory potential**
 - poor personal hygiene**
 - less ambition & productivity**
- Thin applicants preferred over obese applicants
- Obese applicants more appropriate for jobs requiring little “face-to-face” contact

(Bellizi & Hasty, 1998; Larkin & Pines, 1979; Pringitoire et al., 1994; Rothblum et al., 1988; Everett, 1990)



Attitudes of Co-workers

Studies of work-related stereotypes of obese employees include views that they are:

lazy

less competent

sloppy

less conscientious

“think slower”

poor role models

poor self discipline

emotionally unstable

(Paul & Townsend, 1995; Roehling, 1999).



Wage inequities

- Obese women earn 12% less than non-obese females
- Obese women more likely to be in low-paying jobs than thinner women
- Obese men under-represented and paid less than non-obese men in managerial and professional positions

(Register & Williams, 1990; Loh, 1993; Pagan & Davila, 1997; Gortmaker et al., 1993)



Wrongful termination

- Fired due to prejudiced employers and arbitrary weight standards
- Fired despite good to excellent employment records in occupations like: teachers, office managers, computer analysts, city laborers

(Rothblum et al., 1990)



Bias in Educational Settings

Stigmatization by peers

Bias by teachers

Bias by parents



Harassment by Peers at School

- Negative attitudes begin as early as preschool
- Obese kids viewed as ugly, stupid, mean, lazy, unhappy, having few friends, undesirable playmates
- Teased by kids & chosen less as playmates
- Continues through high school & college, where obese students are viewed as self-indulgent, lazy, and sexually unskilled

(Latner & Stunkard, 2002; Counts et al., 1986; Cramer & Steinwert, 1998; Bell & Morgan, 2000)



Bias by Educators

Beliefs of teachers that obese students are:

untidy

more emotional

less likely to succeed at work

more likely to have family problems

undesirable marriage partners

(Neumark-Sztainer et al., 1999; National Education Association, 1994)



National Education Association

“For fat students, the school experience is one of ongoing prejudice, unnoticed discrimination, and almost constant harassment”

“From nursery school through college, fat students experience ostracism, discouragement, and sometimes violence”



Bias by Educators

- Students dismissed from college because of their weight
- Legal case of Sharon Russell: expelled from college for inability to lose weight

(Weiler & Helms, 1993)



Parental stigma of children

- Lower college acceptance rates despite equivalent academic performance....parents?
- Subtle biases modeled at home by parents
- Parents are not immune to weight stigma

(Crandall, 1991; 1995; Adams et al., 1988)



Bias in Health Care

Negative attitudes among
nurses
physicians
medical students

Reluctance to seek health care
Quality of care.....



Obesity Attitudes in Health Care

Self-report studies show that Physicians view obese patients as:

- non-compliant
- dishonest
- lazy
- lacking in self-control
- weak-willed
- unintelligent
- Unsuccessful



Obesity Attitudes in Health Ca

Self-report studies show that Nurses view obese patients as:

non-compliant, overindulgent, lazy, unsuccessful

- 31% “would prefer not to care for obese patients”
- 24% agreed that obese patients “repulsed them”
- 12% “would prefer not to touch obese patients”

(Maroney & Golub, 1992; Hoppe & Ogden, 1997; Bagley et al., 1989)



Obesity Attitudes in Health Ca

Self-report studies show that Medical Students view obese patients as:

unpleasant

sloppy

awkward

unsuccessful

lacking in self-control

*attitudes did not change after 8-week rotations



Utilization of Health Care Services by Obese Women

- Less likely to obtain:
 - preventive health services & exams
 - pelvic exams, Pap smears, mammograms
- More likely to cancel or delay appointments
- 2/3 of patients indicated that “most doctors don’t understand how difficult it is to be overweight.”

(Adams et al., 1993; Fontaine et al., 1998; Olson et al., 1994)



Poor Medical Care for Obese Patients

Physicians:

- less intervention
- less discussion
- ambivalent about treatment roles
- more often assign negative symptoms

(Price et al., 1987; Kristeller & Hoerr, 1997; Pratt et al., 1997; Campbell et al., 2000)



Consequences for Adults

Social rejection

Self-blame for others' negative reactions

Poor body image

Dangerous weight loss behaviors



Consequences for Obese Youth

Lower Self-Esteem

Increased risk for depression

Children blame themselves

Long lasting consequences of teasing

Extreme cases....suicide