

Effects of Weight Stigma



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The “War on Obesity” has led to a proliferation of media campaigns aimed at reducing obesity. Overweight and obese people are often depicted in unflattering and stigmatizing images, including the dehumanized fat person with their head chopped out of the frame engaging in a narrow range of activities that primarily involve eating energy dense foods, sedentary behaviors, or wearing poorly fitting clothing. The media tends to portray overweight and obese people as lazy, weak-willed, self-indulgent, and a drain on the nation’s resources. These media campaigns have intensified stigmatization of overweight and obese people. What is the consequence of weight stigmatizing messages? Do they motivate overweight or obese people to lose weight, as some authors propose? Or do these messages result in negative behavioral consequences that may even increase weight, as some past research suggests?

In “The Ironic Effects of Weight Stigma” (2014), Major et al. examine these questions through the lens of a phenomenon called ‘weight based social identity threat’ (WBSIT for our purposes). WBSIT is a person’s awareness or belief that others see him or her as a member of a social category “overweight” combined with knowledge of the negative stereotypes and devaluation associated with the category. The authors believe that WBSIT results from experiencing, anticipating, or fearing being the target of weight-based discrimination. It is described as a situational threat triggered by cues in the environment. Past research indicates that experiencing social identity threat of any type leads to negative effects including increased anxiety and stress. Coping with WBSIT makes demands on limited executive resources related to self-control. Both increased stress and decreased executive control are linked to increased weight.

In this experimental study, the researchers examined 93 female college students. Their rationale for only enrolling women was based on the argument that women are stigmatized at lower weights than men and experience more weight-based discrimination. Participants completed measures on perceived body weight (rated on a scale of 1-very thin to 7-very heavy), self-esteem, dietary restraint, current dieting, self-efficacy for dietary control, and weight stigma concerns. For the experiment, the researchers asked the study participants to read and describe either a weight-stigmatizing news article titled "lose weight or lose your job" (experimental condition) or a non-weight stigmatizing news article titled "quit smoking or lose your job" (control condition). After being asked to describe the article, participants were asked to wait in a break room with snacks of candy and chips and told that they could help themselves to the snacks.

Results of this research study indicate that, in the weight stigma condition, perceived weight was positively related to how many calories were consumed. This effect was not observed in the control condition. Specifically, women who perceived themselves as above average weight consumed significantly more calories in the weight-stigma condition than in the control condition. The calorie consumption of women who did not perceive themselves as overweight did not differ between the weight-stigma and control conditions.

Perceived weight was also significantly negatively related to self-efficacy for dietary control, meaning that women who perceived themselves as overweight had felt less in control of their diet when they were exposed to the weight-stigmatizing article than the control article. Interestingly, women who did not perceive themselves as overweight had significantly higher self-efficacy for controlling their diet in the weight-stigma condition than in the control condition. The authors posit an admittedly provocative suggestion related to this finding: it may explain why it is difficult for women who do not perceive themselves as overweight to understand the effect of stigmatizing messages for women who are overweight. The authors state: "Among those who are not overweight and who have a hard time understanding what it is like to be overweight, stigma feels like it would help strengthen other people's resolve to eat less because it strengthens their own."

Not surprisingly, the more women perceived themselves to be overweight, the more concerned they were about being the target of weight stigma. In addition, all women who read the weight-stigmatizing article were more concerned about being the target of weight stigma, regardless of if they perceived themselves as overweight or not. The effects observed in this study were not related to hunger, dietary restraint, or self-esteem.

It is important to note that the effects of the current study were associated with self-perceived overweight but was not associated with objective weight, as measured by body mass index (BMI). This indicates that it is perceived weight, not actual weight, that increases a person's vulnerability to experiencing WBSIT and the negative health consequences associated with weight discrimination. Thus, this can affect people of varying shapes and sizes, not just people who are overweight or obese.

This study concludes that for individuals who perceive themselves as overweight, media messages that stigmatize obesity have the effects of increasing calorie consumption and feeling more out of control with eating. Public health campaigns aimed at reducing obesity that stigmatize overweight and obese individuals may have negative psychological and behavioral consequences for people of all shapes and sizes who perceive themselves as overweight.

Reference:

Major, B., Hunger, J., Bunyan, D., Miller, C. (2014) The Ironic Effects of Weight Stigma. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 51: 74-80