

Does Awareness of the Misconceptions of Obesity and Weight Loss Improve Body Image and Soften Perceived Responsibility for Weight Gain?

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Aim of Research

This study focussed upon the previously undiscussed relationship between obesity stigma and normative discontent. Although unexplored, both are significant issues for women and products of a neoliberal society that places a high value upon self-responsibility, and that connects appearance to personal attributes and choices.

While no prior research has measured the impact of obesity-specific information on non-obese people's self-perceptions, previous studies have indicated that promoting acceptance, education, and realistic weight loss expectations can have positive effects for obese people. These messages focus upon the complex relationship between body weight and behaviour, establishing the idea that body weight is not as modifiable through self-discipline as is commonly believed. As these messages challenge fundamental assumptions about the connection between bodies and behaviour, it seemed possible that non-obese people might also be able to experience positive effects when presented this type of information.

We sought to explore whether participants would have lower antifat attitudes when presented with this information, and whether they would feel less personally responsible for the state of their bodies. Additionally, we were interested in the impact that the material would have upon participants' ratings of physical appearance perfectionism, body dissatisfaction, and self esteem.

Methodology

70 women aged from 17-15 years ($M=26$, $SD=10.26$) from Perth, Western Australia participated in the study. 48 participants were psychology students at Murdoch University, while 12 came from outside the school of psychology.

Participants were randomly allocated to one of three groups. Each group was provided with a different article that framed obesity from a particular viewpoint. The Scientific Evidence group received an article that focussed upon biological and metabolic information, discussing the challenges faced by obesity researchers in regard to long term resolutions of obesity. The Personal Story group's article focussed upon anecdotal information, depicting the day-to-day weight maintenance practices of a formerly obese woman. These two articles were intended to demonstrate the complexities of obesity which are often not alluded to in public discourse. The third article, provided to the Control group, was an

excerpt from the World Health Organisation's fact sheet on obesity. It represented widely circulated portrayals of obesity, and presented a limited description of obesity and methods for its prevention, focussing largely on individual responsibility.

After reading the article, each participant completed an identical questionnaire. This consisted of scales measuring self esteem, antifat attitudes, perfectionism, responsibility for weight (a scale created for the purpose of the study), and body dissatisfaction, as well as several open-ended questions pertaining to the article and questionnaire.

Findings

Unexpectedly, no significant differences were found between groups for antifat attitudes despite the articles selected for experimental groups.

No significant differences were found between participants' responses regarding responsibility for weight. This may be because none of the articles explicitly stated that people are not personally responsible for their weight; they simply demonstrated that it was extremely difficult, even impossible, for obese people to successfully keep weight off through their personal actions. There were no significant differences between conditions for physical appearance perfectionism, or for participants' hope for perfection. Dissatisfaction with weight did not differ significantly.

There were various unexpected significant results. Compared to the control group, the participants who read the scientific article had significantly lower self esteem ratings, while the Personal Story condition did not differ significantly from the other conditions.

Compared with the Personal Story group, the Scientific Evidence group participants worried significantly more about imperfection. They were also significantly more dissatisfied with their overall appearance compared to the Personal Story condition.

While it was expected that both experimental conditions would have lower scores on negative constructs compared to the control condition, the results suggest that the Personal Story condition was not significantly different, and that the Scientific Evidence condition actually produced higher scores. This outcome may have been influenced by the Scientific Evidence group's selected excerpt, which included discussion of the ineffectiveness of weight loss techniques and the lack of optimism among experts for future solutions. In contrast, while the Control article presented a narrow and unrealistic view of obesity, it at least suggested that individuals could personally change their circumstances.

The study had various limitations, namely that participants were not representative of the general population, and there was missing data due to measurement errors.

Future studies may consider investigating the influence of weight upon responses to particular types of obesity framing manipulations. Additionally, a longitudinal application of the Responsibility for Weight Scale may be beneficial.

Despite its limitations, the study demonstrated that the relationship between normative discontent and obesity stigma should be explored in a greater capacity in the future.