

Summary of Findings

Responding to the resistance: A critical discursive analysis of women's engagement with Health At Every Size and Fat Acceptance messages.

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Background

The health consequences of body weight have been widely documented and publicised, and the idea that excess weight equals poor health has come to be commonly recognized in western society. Acceptance of this idea has led to stigma becoming attached to weight, with bias and discrimination toward overweight individuals, the outcome. Weight related stigma has a negative impact on both the private and social life of overweight or obese people with women experiencing this impact at higher rates than men (Fikken & Rothblum, 2012; Puhl & Heuer, 2009). Based on the belief that people have control over their body size, weight stigma has been seen as a method for motivating change, however the opposite has occurred. Weight stigma and subsequent discrimination have led to additional risks to health and wellbeing for overweight or obese people. Given reports of increasing rates of obesity throughout out much of the western society, weight discrimination may be seen as an important issue of social injustice

Resisting such discrimination and attempting to reduce weight stigma are two movements in particular, Health At Every Size and Fat Acceptance. The Health At Every Size message is based on evidence revealing the relationship between health and weight to be neither straightforward nor simplistic, and that a focus on weight may be counterproductive for people wanting to improve health. The Health At Every Size movement proposes an approach to health that does not focus on weight or weight loss but rather embraces body diversity, size acceptance and health lifestyle habits. The Fat Acceptance movement also seeks to reduce weight stigma and discrimination, yet does so via a different approach. Fat Acceptance reclaims the word 'fat' and calls for equal rights regardless of body size. Fat Acceptance also embraces size diversity and challenges the ideas that fatness is an illness. The Fat Acceptance movement attempts to separate health and weight and takes the position that pursuit of health is not an obligation one has to society.

Aims of Research

The aim of this research was to examine responses to the messages of Health At Every Size and Fat Acceptance as they resist the current popular ideas around weight, health weight stigma and discrimination. As women are impacted to a greater extent by weight stigma, women also tend to be more involved with promoting and perpetuating messages of resistance. For this reason women have been the focus of this study. By understanding how these messages are received in a wider social context an understanding the grounds for

support, or rejection, insight into the potential of these movements to reduce weight stigma will be achieved.

Methodology

Twenty one women aged between 18 and 60 years (Mean = 30.29) took part in a series of two focus groups. Focus groups ran for 60 minutes and were held one to two weeks apart. There were 3-6 women in each focus group, and 12 focus groups were conducted overall. Focus group one presented content relating to Health At Every Size and focus group two presented the message of Fat Acceptance. Questions focusing on reaction to the materials were posed for discussion.

Transcripts of the focus groups were analysed using the method of Critical Discourse analysis. Via Critical Discourse analysis the appeal the alternate messages hold (if any) may be revealed. How participants grounded their endorsement or rejection of the messages is also able to be considered.

Findings

Participants in this study were sympathetic to the effects of weight stigma and were happy to see challenges to the negative stereotypes of fat people. This engagement however, did not dislodge their beliefs about the un-healthiness of fatness, the controllability of weight nor the moral responsibility of pursuing health. Adherence to these ideas posed a challenge to endorsing opposing messages within this forum. While conventional understanding of the weight and health relationship was frequently positioned as the reason for rejecting the messages of Health At Every Size and Fat Acceptance, there was also evidence of support for these messages attempt to de-stigmatise weight.

In responding to Health At Every Size, participants agreed with the shift from a weight focused approach to health to a more size neutral approach. However they were sceptical about the ability for very large 'super obese' people to be healthy. Participants were also concerned about this message providing an excuse for people not to look after themselves or their children. In responding to Fat Acceptance, participants agreed that all people were deserving of equal rights. Fat oppression, however was seen as quite different to other forms of oppression such as racism and sexism; which were viewed as the result of factors outside of individual control. Responsibility to be healthy featured prominently in the discussion of Fat Acceptance, with participants frequently rejecting the idea that health is not an obligation and that health and weight should be separated. Overall, the Health At Every Size message was received more favourably than the Fat Acceptance message.

References

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- Puhl, R. M. & Heuer, C. A. (2009). The stigma of obesity: A review and Update. *Obesity, 17*, 941-964. doi:10.1038/oby.2008.636