



## Factors associated with mothers' obesity stigma and young children's weight stereotypes<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Parents and children hold negative attitudes about obesity, but little is known about individual differences in obesity stigma. The current study examined authoritarian parenting style, beliefs about the controllability of weight and fear of fat in relation to mothers' dislike of overweight individuals. Factors related to children's weight stereotypes were also investigated. Forty-nine mothers and children (43% girls) participated. Mothers showed more dislike and blame toward adults who are overweight than children who are overweight; parents were most often blamed for children's weight status. Authoritarian parenting and beliefs about controllability were related to mothers' anti-fat attitudes, but fear of fat was not. However, mothers' fear of fat was the best predictor of children's negative stereotypes toward overweight peers. The current study provides some preliminary insight into the role of mothers in children's attitudes about weight. Examining individual difference factors is also useful in planning targeted interventions to lessen obesity stigma.

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Caregivers are not immune from weight prejudice. Research suggests that many doctors, nurses, psychologists, coaches and teachers stigmatize obesity and hold negative attitudes toward individuals who are overweight (i.e., anti-fat attitudes; Bagley, Conklin, Isherwood, Pechiulis, & Watson, 1989; Hague & White, 2005; Harris & Foltz, 1999; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Harris, 1999). Parents are also susceptible to anti-fat attitudes; they hold negative attitudes about their own children's weight (Pierce & Wardle, 1993) and demonstrate prejudiced attitudes to their children (Adams, Hicken, & Salehi, 1988). Moreover, research suggests that parents' negative attitudes about obesity can impact the care and support they provide for their children (Musher-Eizenman, Holub, Hauser, & Young, 2007). However, only a small number of studies have been conducted examining parents' anti-fat attitudes.

Understanding individual differences in parents' anti-fat attitudes could prove useful in developing family-based interventions to promote acceptance of various body sizes. In addition, by examining factors related to parents' anti-fat attitudes and their correspondence to children's developing weight stereotypes, this study will provide

preliminary insight into the pathways by which these attitudes are transmitted from parent to child. It may also provide information related to the development of these attitudes. Thus, the current study drew from research and theory in developmental and social psychology to examine potential individual difference variables. Three factors – authoritarian parenting style, controllability beliefs, and personal fear of fat – were examined to better understand mothers' anti-fat attitudes. In addition, these factors were examined in relation to the weight stereotypes held by young children.

### Anti-fat attitudes in parents

Although research is limited, it is clear from existing studies that parents hold negative attitudes about obesity. Anti-fat attitudes are evident in parents' behavior directed toward offspring who are overweight. For example, adolescents who are overweight report being teased by their parents about their weight more than adolescents who are not overweight (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002). Overweight adolescents are also less likely to receive financial support from their parents for college than average weight adolescents, even after controlling for confounding demographic variables (Crandall, 1995). In addition to this, research suggests that parents' anti-fat attitudes can influence the care they provide for their young children, especially in the domain of child feeding. Specifically, mothers with negative attitudes about weight have been found to restrict or limit their child's food intake, regardless of their child's current weight or eating habits (Musher-Eizenman et al., 2007).

Weight prejudice is also expressed in parents' attitudes about their children's weight and body shape. When mothers were asked to

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choose the most disliked body shape for their 4- to 6-year old child from an array of 7 line drawings ranging from very thin (seemingly emaciated) to overweight, 75% of mothers chose the overweight figure as the least preferred for their child. Most mothers also did not consider the heaviest figures to be acceptable sizes for their children, with only 11% of mothers reporting that any size would be acceptable (Musher-Eizenman, Holub, Edwards-Leeper, Persson, & Goldstein, 2003). Research also suggests that many parents do not label their own children as overweight, even if their children would be classified in this way based on their current height and weight (Jackson, Strauss, Lee, & Hunter, 1990). This finding could be related to the stigma that parents associate with obesity.

Other research has examined parents' anti-fat attitudes directed toward adults more directly. Mothers have been asked to report on their weight-related stereotypes and their explicit dislike of overweight people as measures of their anti-fat attitudes (Davison & Birch, 2004; Jaffe & Worobey, 2006). Research has also examined whether parents direct anti-fat attitudes toward overweight children. Adams et al. (1988) examined parents' attitudes about overweight children by asking parents to tell stories to their preschool-age children using pictures of children of varying sizes in ambiguous situations. Parents portrayed characters who were overweight as having lower self-esteem and as being less successful than non-overweight protagonists (Adams et al., 1988). In another study, when mothers were asked to rank order their preference for six children with potentially stigmatizing, distinguishing characteristics (e.g., a child in a wheelchair, with a scar on his/her face, and without a limb), mothers rated the obese figure as the least preferred (Bacardi-Gascón, Leon-Reyes, & Jiménez-Cruz, 2007).

Nevertheless, current research has yet to examine differences in anti-fat attitudes directed toward adults and children. Societal messages that idealize thinness and degrade fatness are more often directed toward adult body sizes than child body sizes, so it would be expected that adults experience more weight prejudice than children—at least from other adults. It is probably also less socially acceptable to hold anti-fat attitudes toward children than adults. Distinguishing between adults and children as the target of stigma is especially important because people may make different attributions about the causes of adult and childhood obesity. For example, many adults are held personally responsible for their weight (Puhl, Moss-Racusin, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2008); whereas, parents are most often blamed for children's weight (Kokkonen, 2009). Previous research has also not examined whether mothers' anti-fat attitudes directed toward adults and children are differentially related to children's developing weight attitudes. It seems likely that mothers' attitudes toward overweight children would be more closely associated than mothers' attitudes toward overweight adults because these attitudes are more salient to children.

### Children's anti-fat attitudes and associations with maternal attitudes

Research suggests that children begin to form attitudes about different body sizes during early childhood. Most children display negative attitudes toward overweight people as early as age 2 or 3 (Cramer & Steinwert, 1998; Turnbull, Heaslip, & McLeod, 2000). Children rate peers who are overweight more unfavorably than children with various other stigmatizing conditions, such as being handicapped, disfigured or wearing glasses (Sigelman, Miller, & Whitworth, 1986). Children and adolescents also convey their anti-fat attitudes through the stereotypes they express (Cramer & Steinwert, 1998; Kraig & Keel, 2001; Latner & Stunkard, 2003; Latner, Stunkard, & Wilson, 2005; Margulies, Floyd, & Hojniski, 2008; Musher-Eizenman, Holub, Miller, Goldstein, & Edwards-Leeper, 2004; Turnbull et al., 2000). For example, many young children report believing that overweight children are ugly, mean, dumb, messy, that they can't run fast, and that they have few friends (Musher-Eizenman et al., 2004; Turnbull et al., 2000). Results are mixed regarding developmental changes in anti-fat attitudes, with findings

suggesting that these increase during early childhood, remain constant throughout middle childhood and adolescence and decrease slightly during adulthood (Latner & Schwartz, 2005).

Very little research has examined the etiology of anti-fat attitudes, but it is likely that parents play a role in the development of these attitudes. However, only a handful of studies have examined the relationship between parents' and children's attitudes about obesity. Existing findings have been mixed and are likely the result of differences in the outcomes that were examined across studies. A study with adolescents provided some evidence for the association between parents' and adolescents' dislike of individuals who are overweight, suggesting that mothers' self-reported dislike – but not fathers' dislike – was related to adolescents' dislike of individuals who are overweight (O'Bryan, Fishbein, & Ritchey, 2004). Another study suggested that when 5th and 6th grade children and their mothers were asked to rank order six pictures of hypothetical peers with various stigmatizing conditions, children's ratings of the overweight peer were similar to their mothers' ratings of the same peer (Bacardi-Gascón et al., 2007). In contrast, in a study that directly examined the association between the weight stereotypes held by parents and their 9-year-old daughters, no direct association was found (Davison & Birch, 2004). Research has yet to examine associations between parent and child attitudes during early childhood; yet, it is likely that these attitudes might be even more strongly associated as parents are arguably the most important socializing agents during this stage in development. Moreover, because these attitudes develop during early childhood (Cramer & Steinwert, 1998), this is an informative time to examine individual differences in children's anti-fat attitudes.

### Individual differences in mothers' and children's anti-fat attitudes

Research in the domain of racial prejudice has highlighted the role parents play in children's attitudes toward different racial groups. It has long been suggested that the child-rearing environment parents provide, as well as parents' emotions and attitudes directed toward the stigmatized group are influential in children's developing attitudes about race (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Standord, 1950; Allport, 1954). Although research examining individual differences in the domain of weight prejudice is limited, characteristics of the parent-child relationship (i.e., parenting style) and attitudes relevant to weight prejudice (i.e., attributions about weight and personal weight concerns) might be important predictors of parents' stigmatization of overweight individuals and of children's own weight stereotypes.

#### Parenting style

Allport (1954) suggested that negative child-rearing environments, especially those in which parents are cold and rejecting, promote racial prejudice in children. Contemporary researchers have refined this by suggesting that prejudiced attitudes about race are transmitted from parent to child because parents transmit their fundamental ideology to their children (Duckitt, 2001). Ideologies that contribute to individual differences in prejudice include the belief that some people should obey (right-wing authoritarianism) and the belief that some people should dominate (social dominance orientation; Duckitt, 2001).

Research has found a link between the personality trait of authoritarianism and prejudiced attitudes toward those who are overweight (Crandall, 1994; Crandall & Biernat, 1990; Morrison & O'Connor, 1999). People high in authoritarianism endorse the belief that those in authority should be respected and obeyed (Altemeyer, 2004). This is similar to authoritarian parents' beliefs about parent-child relationships (Baumrind, 1971). Authoritarian parenting style, exemplified by high levels of control and low levels of warmth and responsiveness in parenting (Baumrind, 1971), is correlated with authoritarianism (Manuel, 2006; Peterson, Smirles, & Wentworth, 1997) and could reflect this fundamental ideology.

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