

Obesity Bias and Adolescents' Perceptions

What Was the Question?

Obesity continues to be a major problem in the United States, particularly among young people. The cause of this obesity is often a topic of debate. It is commonly attributed to poor health choices, but can also be viewed as a function of the society that children live in. With this in mind, Rukavina and Li (2011) used a survey methodology to examine "adolescents' perceptions of controllability and its relationship to explicit obesity bias" (p. 9) as a function of gender. The authors hypothesized that males would exhibit a higher level of belief in controllability than females and that those with higher perceptions of controllability were more likely to exhibit obesity bias.

What Was Done?

Two hundred thirty-one seventh and eighth graders (males = 92, females = 139; European Americans = 21, African Americans = 198, Hispanics = 1, and others = 11; mean age = 12.55 years, $SD = .66$), who were enrolled in physical education classes at one southern urban school, participated in the study. The students answered 13 questions indicating whether they agreed with a statement (yes or true = 1), disagreed with a statement (no or false = 0), or did not know (don't know = 0.5). These questions addressed the initial cause of obesity and possible solutions (controllability), as well

New Editor Named

The *JOPERD* Editorial Board recently appointed John Todorovich, associate professor and chair of the Department of Health, Leisure, and Exercise Science at the University of West Florida, to be the new editor of the Research Works department. His three-year term will begin next issue.

as explicit attitudes toward overweight people on three scales: "lazy vs. motivated," "stupid vs. smart," and "bad vs. good." Explicit attitude scores were garnered by subtracting the ratings about thin people from fat people. Negative scores indicate bias toward overweight people.

What Was Found?

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the composite controllability score indicated a belief in controllability with no gender differences. Participants endorsed the stereotype of overweight students being lazy, but not the stereotype of them being stupid or bad. The data indicated that those who believe obesity to be controllable had obesity biases. Those who endorsed one stereotype were also more likely to endorse another. A higher than expected proportion of girls (44%) believed that overweight children were not at fault for being overweight, while a majority of boys (89%) agreed that overweight children could become thin if they tried.

What Does the Study Mean?

Based on the finding that the adolescent participants in this study assigned a high degree of personal control to overweight, Rukavina and Li suggested that accurate information should be provided to adolescents regarding environmental factors and personal control. Physical education teachers cannot provide all of the necessary insight, but they can help educate students about the role of external factors (i.e., genetics, parental behaviors, environment, etc.) in adolescents' overweight levels. A key to this is to remind adolescents that their bodies are ever-changing and will be different in a few months time. The goal is not to teach that exercise and diet are not important, but to show

that they are components of maintaining a healthy weight. Of equal importance is to specify that other, sometimes uncontrollable, factors influence weight levels:

...body composition is related to the energy balance formula (energy in, energy out) (controllability), but there are many factors in your home and school life that provide barriers to exercise and eating nutritiously (e.g., dangerous neighborhoods, parents have junk food in the house, attractiveness of videogames). (pp. 13-14)

The authors suggested that this type of information can help change students' view of the controllability of obesity, leading to less bias.

Reference

Rukavina, P. B., & Li, W. (2011). Adolescents' perceptions of controllability and its relationship to explicit obesity bias. *Journal of School Health, 81*(1), 8-14.

—Abstracted by Christopher Hoffman, student, *The College of New Jersey, Ewing, NJ.*

Submissions Welcome!

Readers may send Research Works abstracts to John Todorovich at jtodorovich@uwf.edu.

Submission Requirements

- Abstracts must be of research articles published in refereed *HPERD* journals within the past year.
- Abstracts should follow the Research Works structure.
- Research results should be applicable to practitioners.
- Also send the full text of the source paper.
- Length should be no more than two double-spaced pages.