

Student ND
Professor Lilley
Source Evaluation 4

Research Question

Is there an implicit bias against obese individuals in the health care system, and what role does this play in future health outcomes and the obesity epidemic overall?

Citation

Sutin, Angelina R, et al. "Weight Discrimination and Risk of Mortality." *Psychological Science*, vol. 26, no. 11, SAGE Publications, pp. 1803–11, doi:10.1177/0956797615601103.

Author Information

Angelina Sutin earned her Ph.D. in Psychology from University of California, David, and is now an associate professor at Florida State University. She is also an associate editor for the *Journal of Personality*. Some of her main focuses of study include health disparities, personality and health, and lifespan development.

Summary/Methods

This study was focused on finding out whether weight discrimination played any role in early mortality. The researchers used information from two studies: a longitudinal study of 13,692 people ages 50 and over in 2006-2008, and another study of 7,108 participants in 2004 and 2005. These participants had previously rated in these respective years their everyday experiences with discrimination. Researchers now compared this information with mortality in 2015. They discovered that discrimination, specifically in regards to a person's weight or physical disability, was associated with a higher risk of mortality in both groups. They even discovered that risk factors like smoking, a well-known link to mortality, had similar levels of mortality in the samples. This study sought to show the ways that weight stigma can have serious health implications for obese persons constantly on the other end of the discrimination.

Key Terms

Risk of Mortality - decreased life expectancy

Weight Discrimination - unfair treatment because of one's body weight

Quotation Analysis

1. "...possibility that the stigma associated with being overweight is more harmful than actually being overweight" (Sutin et al., 1807).

The researchers in this study discovered that those who experienced weight discrimination were at a higher risk of mortality, and they even suggest that an obese person being subject to biases, and feelings of shame as a result, might actually be an even stronger indicator of early death than health issues associated with excess weight. This would suggest that feeling discriminated can be enough to lower a person's life expectancy, and since discrimination is a fixable social issue, it is necessary that it be eradicated as soon as possible.

2. "...given that weight is largely perceived to be controllable, unfair treatment because of body weight may lead to feelings of shame because of the perception that people should do something about their weight" (Sutin et al., 1808).

Overweight individuals are frequently blamed for their weight, and society tends to consider obesity a completely individual decision. Health factors and socioeconomic factors, just to name a few, are rarely considered when thinking about why a person is obese. The only thought that frequently comes to mind is that the person is lazy, gluttonous, or not in control of themselves. When everyone around is blaming you, it is no surprise that you might start to blame yourself for the weight, too, or beat yourself up if you can't lose it. Self-blame and shame can increase unhealthy behaviors, thus causing an endless cycle of obesity and discrimination.

3. "The effect of weight discrimination on mortality was generally stronger than that of other forms of discrimination but was comparable with that of other established risk factors, such as smoking history and disease burden" (Sutin et al., 1807).

With the exception of physical disability, being discriminated against for one's weight was related to higher levels of mortality compared to race, gender, sexuality, and other types of discrimination. The mortality levels associated with weight bias were actually on par with well-known risk factors like smoking. This is very important to note because society has become a lot more knowledgeable about the harmful effects of smoking and preach the message to kids and loved ones. Clearly, instilling in everyone the importance of not discriminating based on weight needs to be addressed next.

Synthesis

In Goffman's theory of social stigma, he notes that "the stigmatized individual—at least the 'visibly' stigmatized one—will have special reasons for feeling that mixed social situations make for anxious unanchored interaction" (18), with these 'mixed' situations referring to a stigmatized person and a 'normal'. He further explains that stigmatized people will likely be unsure and self-conscious about how the other will perceive him, which leads to questions about how one should act. These awkward situations can give rise to self-deprecating thoughts in an obese individual. Sutin mentions that "...given that weight is largely perceived to be controllable, unfair treatment because of body weight may lead to feelings of shame because of the perception that people should do something about their weight" (Sutin et al., 1808). Rather than actually inspire someone to make healthy lifestyle changes, blaming an individuals for their weight and ridiculing them can actually just lead to "increases [in] blood pressure, reduce[d] cognitive control, and increases [in] food consumption" (Sutin et al., 1803), thus doing the exact opposite of what is needed.

Since obesity is treated as an individual choice and failure, people tend not to just view ‘obesity’ as an issue, but the whole person. Teachmen and Brownell’s 2001 study on implicit and explicit biases in health care professionals found that negative “attitudes seem to be directed toward obese persons rather than being limited to the concept of obesity, and are evident in a population committed to the care and treatment of obese persons” (Teachmen and Brownell 1529). This issue of discrimination is one that needs to be addressed, as it is causing serious physical and psychological issues. Sutin’s study on mortality rates indicated that “the effect of weight discrimination on mortality was generally stronger than that of other forms of discrimination but was comparable with that of other established risk factors, such as smoking history and disease burden” (Sutin et al., 1807). This indicates that premature death can even be attributed to the experience of stigma, thus making this a national health concern.

Overall Evaluation

This article is from 2015, making it pretty timely. They also used data from a very large sample, increasing the external validity of the study. I would be interested in finding other studies with a similar hypothesis in order to see if these findings that weight bias can increase the risk of mortality can be replicated. I would be interested to know what specifically were the causes of death in the participants that experienced weight stigma in the early 2000s, and I would be curious to know if these causes truly were directly or indirectly linked to the discrimination that they faced.

This was an interesting study for my argument, as most focus solely on whether or not there are biases present. This study took things a step further and looked at the outcomes that this bias can influence.

Questions

How can weight discrimination really be ‘fixed’?

Does weight bias lead to increased health care spending too?