

Obesity bias based on disgust: study

April 27 2010, By Bob Beale



(PhysOrg.com) -- Negative attitudes towards obese people are based on an emotional response of disgust, a new study suggests.

Previous research had focused on the fact that overweight individuals are blamed for being lazy and not exercising self-control, leading to negative evaluations of those individuals.

The new findings, published in the [International Journal of Obesity](#), suggest that the emotion of [disgust](#) can explain that association and may help explain why negative attitudes toward [obese individuals](#) are so resistant to change.

"Although the scientific community acknowledges biological, behavioural and social contributors to body weight, a common belief in

society at large is that one's body weight is almost infinitely malleable," says UNSW psychologist Dr Lenny Vartanian. "The problem with this idea of willpower is that we chalk it up to a moral weakness." Dr Vartanian's findings suggest that this moral judgement is not based on logic but on an emotional response to obesity itself.

The research involved three studies. In the first, 300 American university students completed questionnaires asking how favourably they rated various social groups and how much they believed being part of that group was under an individual's [personal control](#).

They rated [obese people](#), along with 15 other groups, including African Americans, smokers, lottery winners, welfare recipients, drug addicts, homosexuals, the mentally ill, and people who were elderly, homeless, rich or religious. Finally, they were asked to rate the feelings of disgust they held towards each group.

In general, the social groups rated most negatively and with the highest levels of disgust were those perceived to have an element of personal control over being a member of that group. Obese people were among the most negatively viewed groups, on par with homeless people and politicians. The only groups rated as more negatively and as more disgusting were drug addicts and smokers.

A second study with 125 different participants from the same university used the same questionnaire, except that the term "fat people" was used instead of "obese people". The results were identical. Finally, in the third study, 99 students from an Australian university completed slightly different questionnaires but again with an identical result to the first two studies.

The results "provide strong evidence for disgust as a predictor of negative attitudes toward obese people", the paper notes.

Disgust is a basic emotion that motivates distancing from a perceived physical or moral contaminant, Dr Vartanian says, yet such responses can change as a result of social influences: attitudes to smoking, for example, have swung from acceptance towards disgust since the 1950s.

"Attractiveness standards have shifted over time, with more curvaceous figures being preferred in the beginning of the 20th century and again in the 1950s, but more slender ideals being prominent in the 1920s and continually since the 1980s. In parallel with this latter trend, attitudes toward obese individuals are worse today than they were 40 years ago.

"It is possible that these body-type preferences over time have also become moral values, and that those who violate this moral value elicit a disgust response. Efforts to change negative attitudes toward obese individuals, therefore, might work toward reversing this moralization process and reducing the moral value placed on leaner body types."

Provided by University of New South Wales

Citation: Obesity bias based on disgust: study (2010, April 27) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-04-obesity-bias-based-disgust.html>

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