

Negative attitudes toward fat bodies going global, study finds

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Stigma against overweight people is becoming a cultural norm around the world, even in places where larger bodies have traditionally been valued. That's according to a cross-cultural study of attitudes toward obesity to be published in the April issue of *Current Anthropology*.

Researchers from Arizona State University surveyed people in nine diverse locations around the world and found [negative attitudes](#) toward [fat](#) bodies in every one. The results suggest a rapid "globalization of fat stigma" in which overweight people are increasingly viewed as ugly, undesirable, lazy, or lacking in [self control](#), the researchers say.

In the U.S., slim bodies have been idealized and fat ones stigmatized for several decades. But that has not been true of the rest of the world, says Alexandra Brewis, a biological anthropologist and one of the study's authors.

"Previously, a wide range of ethnographic studies have shown that many human societies preferred larger, plumper bodies," Dr. Brewis said. "Plump bodies represented success, generosity, fertility, wealth, and beauty."

But those fat-positive values are quickly giving way to a more negative Western way of looking at [obesity](#), such as symbolizing personal failing.

The researchers surveyed people in Mexico, Argentina, Paraguay, the U.S., and the U.K. Also included were American Samoa, Puerto Rico,

and Tanzania—cultures that have traditionally been thought of as fat-positive. People were asked if they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about body size. Some statements were fat-negative ("Fat people are lazy"), others were fat-positive ("A big woman is a beautiful woman").

The responses across these diverse cultures were largely congruent with Western attitudes, the researchers found. What's more, the highest fat [stigma](#) scores were not in the U.S. or the U.K., "but rather Mexico, Paraguay, and—perhaps most surprisingly—in American Samoa," the researchers write.

The change in attitudes in American Samoa has happened with remarkable speed, says Dr. Brewis. "When I was doing research in the Samoas in the 1990s, we found people starting to take on thinner body ideals, but they didn't yet have discrediting ideas about large bodies," she said. "But that appears to be changing very quickly."

"People from sites that have adopted fat-negative attitudes more recently seem to be more strident," said cultural anthropologist Amber Wutich, another of the study's authors. "The late adopters were more likely to agree with the most judgmental statements like 'fat people are lazy.'"

The study didn't test what is driving this rapid shift in attitude, but the researchers say that "newer forms of educational media, including global public health campaigns" may be playing a role.

Dr. Brewis said the findings reveal another dimension to the global obesity epidemic.

"There are now more overweight than underweight people around the world," she said. "Our results show that this rapid growth in obesity isn't just a concern because it can undermine health. As more people globally

gain weight, we also need to be as concerned about the profound emotional suffering that comes with these types of prejudicial ideas about big bodies taking hold."

More information: Alexandra Brewis, Amber Wutich, Ashlan Falletta-Cowden, and Isa Rodriguez-Soto, "Body Norms and Fat Stigma in Global Perspective." *Current Anthropology* 52:2 (April 2011).

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