

Fat-stigma study: Mass media messages appear to trump opinions of family, close friends

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Women harbor a fat-stigma even though their family and closest friends may not judge them as "fat," according to findings by Arizona State University social scientists. Those research results, published Aug. 17 in the journal *Social Science & Medicine*, have scientists questioning the weight of messages from sources outside one's social networks, especially those in mass media marketing.

"We found that women generally missed the mark when estimating what their [friends](#) and family thought about their weight," said Daniel J. Hruschka, an ASU cultural anthropologist and co-author of the study. "Women were a bit more attuned to the views of close friends and family, but even then, they generally perceived the judgments of others inaccurately."

For this study, the ASU researchers interviewed 112 women aged 18-45 living in Phoenix, Arizona, and 823 others in their family and social networks. The focus was to understand how and why fat-stigma is distributed in the context of everyday interactions and relationships, and test some key ideas about how perceptions of stigma are amplified or mitigated by women's relationships in the framework of their social networks.

Lead author of the study, Alexandra Brewis, a biological anthropologist and director of ASU's Center for Global Health, noted that while obesity

is a major medical and public health challenge, the stigma attached to it also creates suffering and needs to be examined. According to the ASU findings, urging family and friends to be less judgmental may be of little assistance in alleviating the [stigma](#).

"Fat is understood culturally to represent profound personal failing and the attendant moral messages attached to it include laziness, lack of self-control, and being undesirable or even repulsive," the authors wrote. "So powerful and salient are these anti-fat messages that some Americans say they would rather die years sooner or be completely blind than be thought of as obese."

"The question this leaves us with is: 'If it isn't the opinions of friends and [family](#) that make us feel so bad about being overweight, then what does?' What seems most likely is that media and pop cultural [messages](#) are so pervasive and powerful that even the most loving support of those closest to us provides only limited protection against them," said Brewis, who also is a professor and executive director of the School of Human Evolution and Social Change in ASU's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

More information: The findings are published in an article titled "Vulnerability to fat-stigma in women's everyday relationships." journals.elsevier.com/02779536 ... science-and-medicine

Provided by Arizona State University

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