People with obesity often 'dehumanised', study finds

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Credit: University of Liverpool

New research published in *Obesity* has found that people with obesity are not only stigmatised, but are blatantly dehumanised.

Obesity is now very common in most of developed countries. Around one third of US adults and one quarter of UK adults are now medically defined as having obesity. However, obesity is a complex medical condition driven by genetic, environmental and social factors.

Previous research has suggested that people often hold stigmatising and prejudiced views about obesity.

This new research conducted at the University of Liverpool, led by Dr. Inge Kersbergen and Dr. Eric Robinson examined whether stigmatising views about obesity may be more extreme than previously shown. The research examined whether people believe that individuals with obesity are less evolved and human than those without obesity.

Methods used

As part of a recognised research approach employed in a number of other studies, more than 1500 participants, made up of people from the UK, USA and India, completed online surveys to indicate how evolved they consider different groups of people to be on a scale from 0-100.

The researchers also recorded the BMI of those completing the survey to find out whether blatant dehumanisation of obesity was more common among thinner people and investigated whether blatant dehumanisation predicted support for health policies that discriminate against people because of their body weight.

Results

Participants on average rated people with obesity as 'less evolved' and human than people without obesity. On average, participants placed people with obesity approximately 10 points below people without obesity. Blatant dehumanisation was most common among thinner participants, but was also observed among participants who would be medically classed as being 'overweight' or 'obese'.

People who blatantly dehumanised those with obesity were more likely to support health policies that discriminate against people because of their weight.

Eric Robinson, a Reader at the University of Liverpool, said: "This is some of the first evidence that people with obesity are blatantly dehumanised. This tendency to consider people with obesity as 'less human' reveals the level of obesity stigma.

"It's too common for society to present and talk about obesity in dehumanising ways, using animalistic words to describe problems with food (e.g. 'pigging out') or using images that remove the dignity of people living with obesity. Obesity is a complex problem driven by poverty and with significant genetic, psychological and

environmental components. Blatant or subtle dehumanisation of any group is morally wrong and in the context of obesity, what we also know is that the stigma surrounding obesity is actually a barrier to making long-term healthy lifestyle changes."

Inge Kersbergen, now a research fellow at the University of Sheffield, said: "Our results expand on previous literature on obesity stigma by showing that people with obesity are not only disliked and stigmatised, but are explicitly considered to be less human than those without obesity. The fact that levels of dehumanisation were predictive of support for policies that discriminate against people with obesity suggests that dehumanisation may be facilitating further prejudice."

More information: Inge Kersbergen et al. Blatant Dehumanization of People with Obesity, *Obesity* (2019). DOI: 10.1002/oby.22460

Provided by University of Liverpool

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