

Sanobar L. Patel & Shayla C. Holub

The School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences, The University of Texas at Dallas

Introduction

- Overweight children get teased and criticized by peers (Tang-Peronard & Heitmann, 2008).
- Parents show prejudice toward hypothetical overweight children, but less is known about weight related criticism directed toward their own children (Adams, Hicken, & Salehi, 1988).
- Most parents believe that parents are to blame more than children for childhood obesity (Holub, Tan, & Patel, 2011).
- Attribution theory suggests that individuals who believe weight is controllable show greater prejudice (Allison, Basile, & Yaker, 1991; Weiner, 1995).

The current study examined whether parents' weight prejudice and beliefs about who is to blame for children's weight are related to parents' weight-related criticism toward their own children.

Methods

Participants

- 109 parents and their children
- Child mean age = 4.73 years (range: 3 to 6 years)
- Child mean BMI z-score = 0.56 (range: -1.56 to 2.93; SD = .90)

Parent measures

Dislike of Overweight People (Crandall, 1994)

- 3 items
- Ex. "I really don't like fat people"
- 7 point Likert scale (0 = Strongly Disagree, 6 = Strongly Agree)

Blame of Parents for Overweight Children (Holub, Tan, & Patel, 2011)

- 4 items
- Ex. "If children are overweight, it is pretty much their parents' fault."
- 7 point Likert scale (0 = Strongly Disagree, 6 = Strongly Agree)

Blame of Children for Overweight (Holub, Tan, & Patel, 2011)

- 3 items
- Ex. "Fat children tend to be fat pretty much through their own fault."
- 7 point Likert scale (0 = Strongly Disagree, 6 = Strongly Agree)

Appearance or Weight-related Criticism (Holub, under review)

- 13 items
- Ex. "This parent criticizes her child for being out of shape" while "This parent does not criticize her child for being out of shape."
- 4 point Likert scale (1 = very much like 1st parent, 4 = very much like 2nd parent)

Results

Intercorrelations Between Demographic and Key Study Variables

	Child BMI	Child Age	Prejudice	Blame-P	Blame-C	Criticism
Child BMI	--					
Child Age	.10	--				
Prejudice	.01	-.05	--			
Blame-P	-.17	-.01	.19*	--		
Blame-C	-.25**	.06	.38***	.48***	--	
Criticism	.01	.08	.28**	-.01	.17	--

Child BMI = Child BMI Percentile, Blame-P = Parental Blame of Parents, Blame-C = Parental Blame of Children.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Hierarchical Linear Regression Predicting Parental Weight and Appearance Related Criticism.

	B	SE B	β
Step 1 $F(1, 104) = .002, R^2 = .001, p = .96$			
Child BMI z-score	-.01	.03	-.03
Step 2 $\Delta F(3, 101) = 4.44, \Delta R^2 = .12, p = .006$			
Weight prejudice	.08	.03	.28**
Blame of parents for overweight	-.04	.03	-.14
Blame of children for overweight	.04	.03	.15
Step 3 $\Delta F(2, 99) = 5.87, \Delta R^2 = .09, p = .004$			
Prejudice x blame of parents	-.10	.04	-1.58**
Prejudice x blame of children	-.02	.03	-.29

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Discussion

Children's actual weight was not related to parents' weight and appearance-related criticism.

Parents high in weight prejudice criticized their children about their appearance and weight, regardless of children's weight.

- This finding has implications for child outcomes.
 - Preadolescents who experience weight-related criticism are at an increased risk for body dissatisfaction and subsequent victimization (Nelson, Jensen, & Steele, 2011).
 - Interventions should be created to lessen weight prejudice.

Parents' weight prejudice was related to blaming of parents and children for children's overweight, supporting attribution theory.

- Other environmental influences (e.g., physical activity, nutrition in school) also contribute to weight status (Brownell & Wadden, 1992).
- Future research should examine what leads parents to blame other parents. This could be useful to develop educational programs and awareness about weight prejudice.

When parents high in weight prejudice blamed parents for children's weight status, they criticized their own children less.

- This suggests that some parents blame themselves, but it is unclear if they view their own children as overweight.
- Future research should examine observations of actual behaviors of parental criticism toward their children's weight.

References

- Adams, G. R., Hicken, M., & Salehi, M. (1988). Socialization of the physical attractiveness stereotype: Parental expectations and verbal behaviors. *International Journal of Psychology, 23*, 137-149.
- Allison, D. B., Basile, V. C., & Yaker, H. E. (1991). The measurement of attitudes toward and beliefs about obese persons. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 10*, 599-607.
- Brownell, K. D., & Wadden, T. A. (1992). Etiology and treatment of obesity: Understanding a serious, prevalent, and refractory disorder. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 60*, 505-517.
- Crandall, C. S. (1994). Prejudice against fat people: ideology and self-interest. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 66*, 882-894.
- Holub, S. C., Tan, C., & Patel, S. L. (2011). Factors associated with mothers' obesity stigma and young children's weight stereotypes. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 32*, 118-126.
- Tang-Péronard, J. L., & Heitmann, B. L. (2008). Stigmatization of obese children and adolescents, the importance of gender. *Obesity Reviews, 9*, 522-534.
- Thompson, S. H., & Sargent, R. G. (2000). Black and white women's weight-related attitudes and parental criticism of their childhood appearance. *Women and Health, 30*, 77-92.
- Weiner, B. (1995). *Judgments of responsibility: A foundation for a theory of social conduct*. New York: Guilford Press.

This research was funded by a grant from the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health.

Author contact information: slpatel@utdallas.edu
Poster presented at the Society for Research in Human Development, March 2012.