



Short communication

Experiences of weightism among sexual minority men: Relationships with Body Mass Index, body dissatisfaction, and psychological quality of life



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ABSTRACT

Rationale: Experiences of weightism are associated with reduced psychological quality of life among heterosexual men and women. However, despite noted vulnerability to body image pressures, weightism has not been quantitatively examined among sexual minority men. We tested two hypotheses: first, that Body Mass Index (BMI) and weightism would evidence a curvilinear relationship, such that underweight and overweight men would report experiencing more weightism than men in the “normal” weight range; and second, that a negative association between BMI and quality of life would be explained by experiences of weightism and body dissatisfaction.

Method: Sexual minority men living in Australia and New Zealand ($N = 2733$) completed an online survey and provided data on their height, weight, experiences of weightism, body dissatisfaction, and psychological quality of life.

Results: Participants' BMIs ranged from 14.15 to 68.12 with 3.0% classified as underweight, 50.5% as “normal” weight, 28.0% as overweight, and 17.4% as obese. Weightism was experienced by 38.9% of participants. As predicted, weightism evidenced a curvilinear relationship with BMI, such that underweight and overweight participants reported experiencing more weightism relative to “normal” weight participants. Yet, this curvilinear relationship evidenced a dominant linear component: Overall, weightism markedly increased as BMI increased, and obese participants reported experiencing the most weightism. In addition, we found evidence supporting our hypothesis that men with higher BMIs would report experiencing more weightism and higher body dissatisfaction, and through these variables, reduced quality of life. Adjusted for body dissatisfaction and weightism, the formerly negative association of BMI with psychological quality of life became (weakly) positive. **Conclusions:** Weightism is a salient phenomenon experienced by sexual minority men in smaller and larger bodies with potential direct and indirect adverse effects on psychological quality of life. Whilst BMI and weightism evidenced a curvilinear relationship, the burden of weightism is disproportionately borne by sexual minority men with higher BMIs.

1. Introduction

Worldwide increases in body weight (World Health Organization, 2016) have been accompanied by increased weightism (Andreyeva et al., 2008; Puhl et al., 2008). Weightism (or weight stigma) refers to negative treatment of people on the basis of their body weight and/or size (Puhl and Brownell, 2001) and is inclusive of stereotypes (e.g., the stereotype that larger individuals lack willpower), prejudice (e.g., the

treatment of larger individuals as incompetent), and discrimination (e.g., the denial of employment opportunities to larger individuals) (Papadopoulos and Brennan, 2015; Puhl and Heuer, 2009). While substantive work has examined negative effects of weightism in women (Puhl and Heuer, 2009), and an emerging body of work has examined weightism in heterosexual men (Himmelstein et al., 2018), scant research has examined weightism in sexual minority men. Thus, we recruited a large and geographically representative sample of sexual

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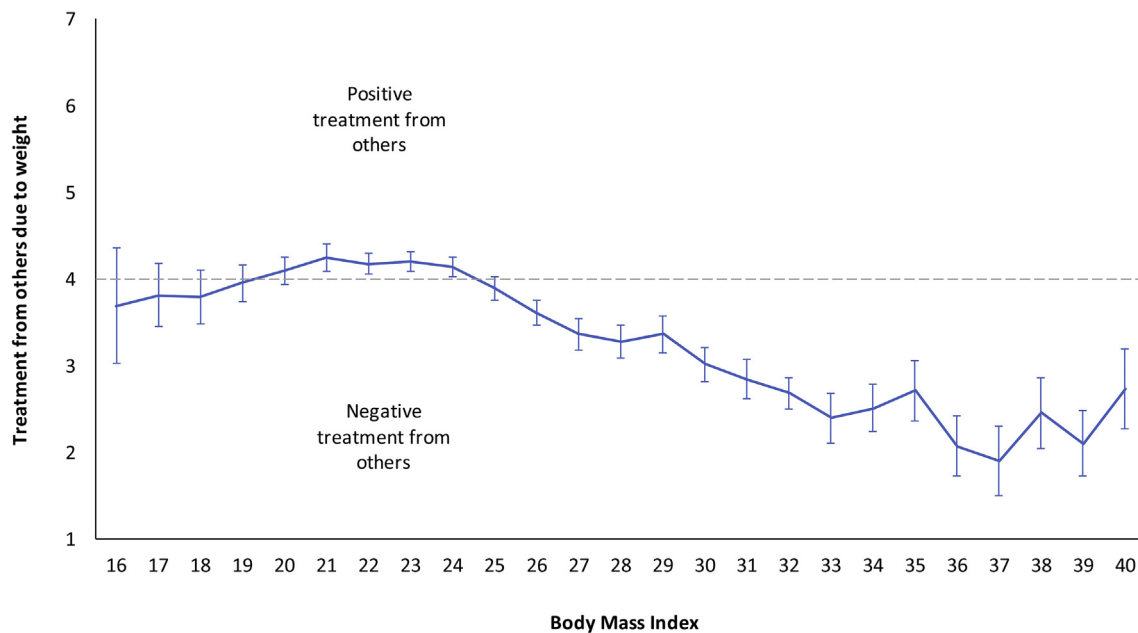


Fig. 1. Mean weight-related treatment as a function of participants' own Body Mass Index (BMI). BMIs are binned in 1-unit increments from 16 through 40 (minimum threshold of 10 participants per BMI bin). Treatment due to weight was anchored at one (“much worse than others”) and seven (“much better than others”) with the midpoint at four (“about the same as others”). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. For reference purposes, a horizontal line at has been drawn at four.

minority men to examine how weightism is experienced by sexual minority men of different body weights. Moreover, we evaluated a model of how weightism and body dissatisfaction might explain the well-established negative relationship of body weight with psychological quality of life (QoL) (e.g., Schwimmer et al., 2003).

Experiencing weightism is associated with a range of adverse psychological outcomes (Papadopoulos and Brennan, 2015; Puhl and Heuer, 2009; Vartanian and Smyth, 2013), including, most notably, poorer psychological QoL (Latner et al., 2013; Papadopoulos and Brennan, 2015). Psychological QoL provides an overarching measure of general psychological wellbeing and is increasingly being used to gauge the size and severity of mental health-related public health burdens, including weightism. Notably, the association of weightism experiences with poorer psychological QoL remains significant after controlling for Body Mass Index (BMI) (e.g., Hunger and Major, 2015; Latner et al., 2013), suggesting that experiences of weightism, rather than simply weight itself, may explain why heavier individuals have lower levels of psychological wellbeing.

Despite worldwide increases in men's BMIs (World Health Organization, 2016), few studies of weightism have been conducted with men. One notable and recent general population study by Himmelstein et al. (2018) showed that approximately 40% of heterosexual men reported experiencing weightism. Further, underweight and overweight men reported more weightism relative to “normal” weight individuals. In women, the relationship between weightism and BMI is linear, in that weightism increases as BMI increases (Puhl and Brownell, 2001). This can be attributed to the Western female body “ideal” which emphasises thinness, with heavier women more likely to experience weightism (Puhl and Brownell, 2001). By contrast, the Western male body “ideal” emphasises lean muscularity (e.g., Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2006). Therefore, in men, we would expect experiences of weightism to demonstrate a curvilinear (U-shaped) relationship with BMI, such that men with either high or low BMIs are more likely to experience weightism (Himmelstein et al., 2018).

To date, we are unaware of any quantitative research that has examined how weightism is experienced by sexual minority men (i.e., men who identify as gay or bisexual among other non-heterosexual identities). The rationale for such research is compelling. First, relative to their heterosexual counterparts, sexual minority men evidence

increased rates of body dissatisfaction (Frederick and Essayli, 2016) and eating disorders (Calzo et al., 2017). Second, consistent with theories of multiple minority stressors, sexual minority men may be disproportionately impacted by weightism due to their increased likelihood of experiencing multiple intersecting and compounding discriminations (e.g., discrimination due to weight and sexual orientation) (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Johnson and Acabchuk, 2018). Third, researchers have noted that the “male gaze”, a term used to refer to heterosexual men's tendency to evaluate women through a prism of sexual desire, is highly salient amongst sexual minority men (Wood, 2008). Extending this concept to the context of sexual minority men, it has been suggested that constant immersion in the “gay male gaze” might contribute to both increased appearance pressures and appearance-based stigmatisation within communities of sexual minority men (Martins et al., 2007).

Thus, we aimed to explore whether and how sexual minority men's experiences of weightism might be associated with their BMI and psychological QoL. Given the aforementioned research demonstrating lower psychological QoL among individuals with higher BMIs, we expected to observe the same in our sample of sexual minority men. Further to this, and in line with past research, we expected that higher BMIs would be associated with greater experiences of weightism. We expected this because the linear component of the curvilinear relationship of BMI with weightism is notably dominant over the quadratic component (as observed by Himmelstein et al., 2018). In turn, we proposed that those experiencing higher levels of weightism would report higher levels of body dissatisfaction (Harriger and Thompson, 2012), which in turn would be associated with reduced psychological QoL (Latner et al., 2013). In summary, drawing on a large sample of sexual minority men, we examined two hypotheses: first, that the relationship of BMI and experiences of weightism would be curvilinear; and second, that experiences of weightism and subsequent body dissatisfaction would explain the negative relationship of BMI with psychological QoL.

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