



# “You better not leave me shaming!”: Conditional indirect effect analyses of anti-fat attitudes, body shame, and fat talk as a function of self-compassion in college women



Jennifer B. Webb\*, Mallory F. Fiery, Nadia Jafari

University of North Carolina at Charlotte Health Psychology Ph.D. Program, Charlotte, NC, United States

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## ABSTRACT

The present investigation provided a theoretically-driven analysis testing whether body shame helped account for the predicted positive associations between explicit weight bias in the form of possessing anti-fat attitudes (i.e., dislike, fear of fat, and willpower beliefs) and engaging in fat talk among 309 weight-diverse college women. We also evaluated whether self-compassion served as a protective factor in these relationships. Robust non-parametric bootstrap resampling procedures adjusted for body mass index (BMI) revealed stronger indirect and conditional indirect effects for dislike and fear of fat attitudes and weaker, marginal effects for the models inclusive of willpower beliefs. In general, the indirect effect of anti-fat attitudes on fat talk via body shame declined with increasing levels of self-compassion. Our preliminary findings may point to useful process variables to target in mitigating the impact of endorsing anti-fat prejudice on fat talk in college women and may help clarify who is at higher risk.

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## Introduction

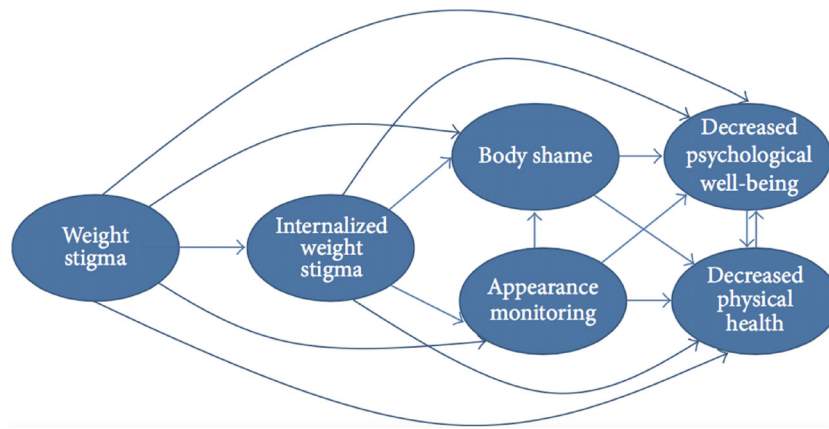
For many women and girls, contemporary Western culture's idealization of the thin, lean and “fit” body (Benton & Karazsia, 2015; Grogan, 2008; Homan, McHugh, Wells, Watson, & King, 2012) coincides with accentuating the intolerance and devaluation of fat embodiment (Crandall, 1994; Smith, 2012). *Anti-fat attitudes* constitute one approach to conceptualizing explicit weight bias. As originally defined by Crandall (1994) these deep-seated weightism beliefs are identified as occurring along three dimensions. *Dislike* attitudes reflect endorsements of strong contempt for fat individuals. *Willpower* beliefs are rooted in Americans' dominant socio-political ideology centering on valuing self-determination and personal control such that fat individuals are deemed wholly responsible for their “excess” weight and are thus deserving of their consequent stigmatization (McHugh & Kasardo, 2012; Smith, 2012). Finally, *fear of fat* attitudes stem from Western society's pervasive degradation of fatness and represent intensified apprehension over the prospect of gaining weight as a marker of inhabiting a socially marginalized body (Crandall, 1994).

Scholarship has revealed that subscribing to such fat-oppressive attitudes is associated with heightened body image and eating disturbances in women. For instance, research conducted in predominantly college female samples indicates that higher anti-fat bias corresponds with increased levels of body dissatisfaction, dysfunctional appearance attitudes, drive for thinness, disordered eating behavior, body checking, and inclinations to engage in physical appearance comparisons (Alperin, Hornsey, Hayward, Diedrichs, & Barlow, 2014; Lin & Reid, 2009; Magallares, 2012; O'Brien, Hunter, Halberstadt, & Anderson, 2007; Pepper & Ruiz, 2007). Importantly, recent findings also demonstrated that endorsing anti-fat attitudes is linked with higher levels of participating in the normative reciprocal denigration of one's body termed “fat talk” (Alperin et al., 2014; Nichter, 2000).

This preliminary evidence suggests that advocating explicit weight bias may not only hold harmful intrapersonal consequences but its potential adverse effects may also infiltrate the relational context as well. It stands to reason that each component of the constellation of anti-fat attitudes could serve as content for expressing fat talk with female peers. For example, a young woman could: (a) bemoan how she is lazy or embodies another negative fat stereotype (dislike), (b) complain that she lacks sufficient self-control in failing to stick to her intended exercise regime or diet plan (willpower), and (c) disclose distress over the belief that she is gaining weight and not fitting in her jeans (fear of fat). Thus, exchanging negative body commentary with peers could be conceptualized

\* Corresponding author at: University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Department of Psychology, Colvard 4024, 9201 University City Blvd, Charlotte, NC 28223, United States. Tel.: +1 704 687 1320; fax: +1 704 687 1317.

E-mail address: [jennifer.webb@uncc.edu](mailto:jennifer.webb@uncc.edu) (J.B. Webb).



**Fig. 1.** Theoretical model of weight stigma and its associated variables.

Reprinted from “The weight-inclusive versus weight-normative approach to health: Evaluating the evidence for prioritizing well-being over weight loss,” by T.L. Tylka et al., 2014, *Journal of Obesity*, 2014, p. 9. Copyright [2014] by Tracy L. Tylka et al. Reprinted with permission.

as the interpersonal expression of internalized anti-fat bias. Yet, Alperin et al. (2014) used a composite measure of anti-fat attitudes in their analysis. Therefore, it was of interest in the present investigation to examine whether the strength of the effects varied among the three dimensions of the construct. This approach is aligned with research demonstrating the presence of larger effects for fear of fat relative to dislike and willpower beliefs in relation to eating concerns and body dissatisfaction in ethnically-diverse college women (Pepper & Ruiz, 2007).

Like holding negative views toward fatness, frequently disclosing self-disparaging body-related complaints in everyday conversations with peers is a marker of women’s compromised well-being (Clarke, Murnen, & Smolak, 2010; Compeau & Ambwani, 2013; Jones, Crowther, & Ciesla, 2014; Shannon & Mills, 2015; Sharpe, Naumann, Treasure, & Schmidt, 2013). More precisely, a recent systematic review revealed higher levels of fat talk to be associated with increased depression, social comparison tendencies, perceived sociocultural pressures to be thin, appearance investment, body dissatisfaction, eating disorder pathology, body surveillance, body checking, and body-related cognitive distortions in college women (Shannon & Mills, 2015). More frequent fat talk was also linked to lower self-esteem, body appreciation, and body esteem in undergraduate females (Shannon & Mills, 2015). Therefore, the co-occurrence of anti-fat attitudes and fat talk is particularly problematic in undermining young women’s psychosocial well-being.

Given the host of negative health implications at stake, it is important to begin to identify potential modifiable psychological processes that may help explain the association between anti-fat attitudes and fat talk in young women. Pursuing this objective initially in cross-sectional research would provide a preliminary window into possible operative mechanisms for future experimental and/or intervention science to target toward averting the cascade of ill effects downstream. The newly-introduced weight stigma and well-being theoretical model would elect body shame as a leading candidate intermediary pathway in this relationship (Tylka et al., 2014).

Body shame is an acute affective experience stemming from perceptions of having failed to achieve narrowly-defined cultural standards of body size (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996). In Tylka et al.’s (2014) comprehensive framework (see Fig. 1), body shame partially accounts for why weight stigma exerts its pernicious effects on both dimensions of psychological and physiological health and well-being. In the present study we argue that this broader explanatory model could be adapted to conceptualize why espousing weight-stigmatizing beliefs (versus

exposure to weight-stigmatizing experiences per say) would be indirectly linked to the specific criterion domain of increased fat talk with peers via body shame.

First, existing evidence partially supports the proposed alpha pathways between the predictors and mediator in our expanded model. McKinley and Hyde (1996) observed a positive association between fear of fat attitudes and body shame in constructing and validating their measure of objectified body consciousness in a modest-sized female college sample. Later analyses conducted by Burmeister, Hinman, Koball, Hoffman, and Carels (2013) further replicated this effect (albeit non-significant) in a predominantly female higher weight treatment-seeking sample. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) offers a compelling rationale for why increased anti-fat bias (and in particular those attitudes reflecting an elevated concern over becoming fat) co-occurs with increased body shame.

Indeed, adherence to negative attitudes toward fatness not only involves the externalized devaluing of others’ larger bodies but is also associated with a reflexive body comparison process. Awareness of one’s own fat prejudice (e.g., interpersonal contact with a higher weight individual) may prompt the automatic, internal evaluation of one’s relative closeness to or distance from “embodying fatness” as a marginalized social position (Alperin et al., 2014). This self-scrutiny in turn may hold important affective repercussions for the individual such as instigating self-denigrating body shame. This reasoning is consistent with evidence demonstrating how restrained eaters felt worse about themselves when they perceived themselves to be more similar to a plus-size versus a thinner model (Papies & Nicolajje, 2012). Complementary support for this rationale is also provided by findings implicating appearance comparison processes in mediating the effect of internalization of the thin ideal (presumably the corollary to endorsing anti-fat attitudes) on body shame among undergraduate women (Markham, Thompson, & Bowling, 2005). Thus, we predict that body shame will have the strongest association with fear of fat attitudes in our weight-diverse sample. Yet we also surmise that the remaining dislike and willpower beliefs will demonstrate significant though more modest-sized links with body shame in light of the overriding anti-fat sentiment permeating modern day public health efforts to stem the tide of “the obesity epidemic” (Puhl & Suh, 2015).

Secondly, research confirms the proposed beta pathway between the mediator and criterion in our updated model. Scholarship has consistently documented the positive link between body shame and fat talk in college women (Arroyo, Segrin, & Harwood, 2014; Clarke et al., 2010; Royal, MacDonald, & Dionne, 2013). Affect regulation theoretical principles offer a useful

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