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Anti-Fat Attitudes And Weight Stereotypes: A Comparison Between Adolescents And Their Teachers

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Abstract

Purpose: the comparison between adolescents and their physical education teachers/trainers about anti-fat attitudes and weight stereotypes. Method: Anti-fat Attitudes and Dislike of Fat People Scale, Fat Stereotypes Questionnaire, and Semantic Differentials referred to Physical Self, Overweight, and Normal-weight People. Results: non-agonistic adolescents expressed higher levels of anti-fat attitudes than the others and curricular teachers showed higher levels of dislike for fat people than the others. Both positive and negative weight stereotypes were associated to fat people both by agonistic adolescents and physical education teachers/trainers. Agonistic adolescents expressed a more positive representation of normal-weight people and their physical self than the others. Lastly, the more the participants expressed high levels of anti-fat attitudes, the less they positively judged the representation of overweight people.

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Keywords: Anti-fat attitudes; weight stereotypes; agonistic adolescents; physical education teachers;

1. Introduction

A wide interest for the study of anti-fat attitudes and stereotypes referred to fat people has been demonstrated by a large amount of scholars who carried out their investigations in different socio-cultural countries, such as Crandall (1994), Cogan, Bhalla, Sefa-Dedeh, and Rothblum (1996), Morrison and O'Connor (1999), Bell and Morgan (2000), Tiggemann and Anesbury (2000), Musher-Eizenman and colleagues (2004), O'Brien, Hunter, and Banks (2007), Solbes and Enesco (2010), and Carels and Musher-Eizenman (2010). For example, as reported in Bell and Morgan's research (2000), children chose overweight target less than average-weight ones and wished to interact with them less than with average-weight ones. Furthermore, Musher-Eizenman et al. (2004) found that children

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tended to choose normal-weight or thin peers as best friends and playmates more frequently than overweight ones. In addition, older adolescents rated larger sized figures as more acceptable compared with elementary school children (Rand & Wright, 2000) and college students ranked drawings of overweight peers more favorably than did elementary school children (Latner, Stunkard, & Wilson, 2005). In a sample of physical education students, Greenleaf and her colleagues (2006) found that students selected more positive characteristics for the thin target and more negative characteristics for the fat target; female students showed a greater willingness to engage in social, academic, and recreational activities with the thin target than male ones. In relation to adulthood, findings of some studies indicated that the more the adults expressed anti-fat prejudice and propensity to judge the others in relation to their own physical appearance (Livingston, 2001), the more they tended to show negative attitudes toward overweight people (Peterson, Puhl, & Luedicke, 2012a). Additionally, people who think that weight was a controllable factor showed more negative attitudes toward obese adults than people who consider that weight was not a controllable factor (Carels & Musher-Eizenman, 2010). Also, as reported by fitness professionals and regular exercisers, tested by Robertson and Vohora (2008) using both implicit and explicit measures of anti-fat attitudes, fat people were judged worse and lazier than thin people. Concerning the weight stereotypes, children, adolescents, and adults displayed negative stereotypes toward fat people by attributing to them more negative traits and fewer positive traits (Greenleaf, Starks, Gomez, Chambliss, & Martin, 2004) than to thin and normal-weight people (Brochu & Morrison, 2007). Overweight teenagers were labelled more frequently as targets and victims of weight stereotyped beliefs expressed by their teachers and coaches during physical activity at school (Peterson, Puhl, & Luedicke, 2012b). Physical educators held negative stereotyped beliefs about overweight children's physical condition, self-concept and body image, and ability to play sports (Peters & Jones, 2010). The analysis of anti-fat attitudes and weight stereotypes from infancy to adulthood in Italian context (De Caroli, Sagone, & Licciardello, 2013; De Caroli & Sagone, 2013) indicated that younger children (6-8 years-old) expressed high levels of anti-fat prejudice and chose, more often than older ones (9-10 years-old), normal-weight peers as best friends and classmates and rejected to walk around and to play together with overweight peers. They attributed to overweight peers negative stereotyped traits, such as hungry, slow, and rejected by the others. Additionally, the more the children expressed high levels of anti-fat prejudice, the more they rejected to walk around and play together with overweight peers. Analyzing the findings referred to a large amount of participants formed by preadolescents (11-13 years-old), adolescents (14-18 years-old), university students (19-35 years-old), and adults (36-55 years-old), higher levels of anti-fat attitudes expressed by adolescents than other age-groups and negative stereotyped traits (e.g., aggressive, lazy, rejected, and bossy) assigned to overweight people emerged. Differently, adults attributed positive characteristics (e.g., happy, courageous, generous, and quiet) to overweight people more frequently than the other age-groups. Furthermore, the group of adolescents judged the representation of overweight people less positively than the other age-groups.

1.1. Purpose of study

The originality of the present study consisted of the analysis of anti-fat attitudes and weight stereotyped beliefs expressed by Sicilian adolescents (involved in agonistic and non-agonistic physical activity) and by their teachers (curricular and physical education) and trainers.

1.2. Participants

The sample of this research was composed by:

-N.128 Sicilian normal-weight adolescents ($M_{age}=15,4$; $sd=1,6$), all with BMI between the 5th and 85th percentiles according to the clinical values reported by Cacciari et al. (2006): this sample was balanced in 64 subjects (23 boys and 41 girls) involved in agonistic physical activities (that is, intensive exercise from three to seven days for a week) and 64 subjects (39 boys and 25 girls) in non-agonistic physical activities (that is, regular exercise for twice a week), recruited both from six Public Secondary Schools and Gym Centers in Catania (East Sicily, Italy); parental consent was obtained for the participation of adolescents to this investigation.

-N.140 Sicilian teachers, mainly normal-weight adults, divided in 70 curricular teachers (24 men and 46 women; $M_{age}=48,3$; $sd=7,03$) and 70 physical education teachers/trainers (48 men and 22 women; $M_{age}=42,3$; $sd=10,6$),

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