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Anti-fat or anti-thin attitudes toward peers? Stereotyped beliefs and weight prejudice in Italian children

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Abstract

This study explored weight prejudice in 140 Italian pupils aged 5-10 by examining a) stereotyped beliefs that pupils have regarding overweight, underweight, and normal-weight body picture of children, b) the anti-fat attitudes, c) the choice of best friend and classmate, and d) the relationships between the anti-fat attitudes and the choice of best friend/classmate and the rejection referred to recreational activities expressed toward one of the body pictures. Results showed that pupils attributed negative characteristics to overweight and positive traits to normal-weight body pictures and expressed high levels of anti-fat attitudes toward overweight peers. Pupils chose normal-weight and underweight body picture of children as best friends/classmates and rejected overweight body pictures for recreational activities. Pupils who expressed negative attitudes toward overweight peers chose underweight peers as best friends/classmates and rejected overweight ones. Future researches could investigate measures that can be taken to reduce anti-fat prejudice in Italian school context.

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1. Introduction

In Italy, the issue of childhood obesity has been dealt with the so-called “Okkio alla Salute” National Project (2008) supported by the Ministry of Health and carried out on a representative sample of 45.590 third grade children of 2.610 Primary Schools. Results reported that every third child has a bigger weight than that expected for his or her age. In particular, 23,6% of children are overweight and 12,3% are obese. In addition, significant differences emerged in the Southern Regions, most of all in Campania (with rate of obesity equal to 21%), followed by Sicily (17%) and Calabria (16%), compared to national average equal to 12%. These data are in contrast with the slogan “thin is good, fat is bad” that is widespread in newspapers and social networks, and could emphasize latent or manifest forms of discrimination and rejection among peers in school context, contributing to development of negative attitudes and stereotyped beliefs about overweight individuals.

A considerable amount of international studies have documented the presence of anti-fat and pro-thin attitudes, negative stereotypes toward overweight and obese individuals, and negative prejudices toward the controllability of body size even in very young children (Richardson, Goodman, Hastorf, & Dornbusch, 1961; Sigelman, Miller, & Whitworth, 1986; Crandall, 1994; Brylinsky & Moore, 1994; Cramer & Steinwert, 1998; Morrison & O’Connor, 1999; Frankova, 2000; Tiggemann & Anesbury, 2000; Lowes & Tiggemann, 2003; Musher-Eizenman, Holub, Miller, Goldstein, & Edwards-Leeper, 2004; Penny & Haddock, 2007). In fact, in two of the most classical

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researches carried out on these phenomena, Cramer and Steinwert (1998) and, previously, Richardson et al. (1961) found that, respectively, preschoolers most often chose the thin or average children as potential playmates compared to the chubby children and 10-11 years old children have judged an obese child less able than a child with physical handicap (e.g. with facial disfigurement or in a wheelchair). In addition, more recently Latner and Stunkard (2003) observed that 5th and 6th grade children's attitudes toward overweight peers were more negative than those toward individuals with other types of stigma as physical disabilities (e.g. with crutches, in a wheelchair, without left hand, and with a facial disfigurement): these last findings indicated that stigmatization of obesity by children appears to have increased over the last 40 years.

Children, adolescents, and young adults expressed negative stereotypes toward overweight and obese individuals by attributing more negative and fewer positive traits to hypothetical fat peers such as "lazy", "slow", "gross", "sad", and "unattractive" (Greenleaf, Starks, Gomez, Chambliss, & Martin, 2004) than to thin and normal-weight peers (Brochu & Morrison, 2007). Overweight body pictures were estimated by children as more mean, sick, ugly, stupid, dirty, lazy, and sloppy, and less smart, happy, popular and attractive than normal-weight ones (Tiggemann & Wilson-Barrett, 1998; Davison & Birch, 2004; Harriger, Calogero, Witherington, & Smith, 2010). Recently, Patel and Holub (2011) examined the relationship between weight stereotypes among children aged 4 to 8 (using the five adjective rating scale), selection of overweight peers as playmates and best friends, and willingness to help overweight peers (measured through story books depicting one average-weight and one overweight target figure as needing help in daily situations). As reported by the authors' findings, "children display weight prejudice through their negative stereotypes, their aversion to choose hypothetical overweight peers as friends and playmates, and their unwillingness to help overweight peers" (Patel & Holub, 2011, p.386). The same trend was observed in negative situations, in the sense that children selected the picture of an overweight child as victim of name-calling and teasing more than that of a non-overweight child (Adams & Bukowski, 2008; Nabors et al., 2011). Furthermore, overweight and obese 11- to 16-year-old adolescents were considered more likely to be the victims and perpetrators of bullying than their normal-weight peers (Janssen, Craig, Boyce, & Pickett, 2004).

Children preferred overweight children less than non-obese ones and wished to interact with them less than with average-weight target children (Sigelman, 1991; Bell & Morgan, 2000). They also chose normal-weight or thin peers as best friends and playmates more frequently than overweight peers (Goldfield & Chrisler, 1995; Musher-Eizenman et al., 2004; Margulies, Floyd & Hojniski, 2008). In fact, as demonstrated by Margulies and colleagues' study (2008), when children were shown a large number of drawings depicting underweight, average-weight, and overweight child and asked to choose three playmates and a best friend, they selected the average-weight and thin children on drawings as friends and playmates significantly more often than the overweight ones. As reported by Harper (1999), Bell and Morgan (2000), and Greenleaf and colleagues (2006), children were less likely to choose hypothetical overweight peers as partners in school-related activities and were less likely to interact with them in social-recreational activities because their preferences for playmates depended on their belief that the target child would be able to perform the desired activity.

In the USA and many European countries, a significant attention has been paid to this phenomenon. Meanwhile, the analysis of weight prejudice and stereotyped beliefs toward overweight and underweight individuals among children aged 5-10 is almost entirely absent in the Italian context. This represents the rationale of the current investigation.

2. Methodology

This study was focused on the exploration of children's weight prejudice by examining a) stereotyped beliefs that pupils have about overweight, underweight, and normal-weight body pictures of children, b) the anti-fat attitudes, c) the choice of these body pictures as best friends and classmates, and d) the relationships between the anti-fat attitudes and the choice of best friends/classmates and the rejection for recreational activities. It was hypothesized that pupils will attribute negative stereotyped beliefs to overweight and underweight more than to normal-weight body pictures (H1); pupils will express high levels of anti-fat attitudes toward overweight peers (H2); in addition, pupils will choose normal-weight and underweight peers as best friends and classmates and will refuse to participate in recreational activities together with overweight peers (H3); finally, pupils who will express negative attitudes toward overweight peers will choose underweight peers as best friends and classmates and will refuse overweight ones (H4).

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