

# Meaning of the Terms “Overweight” and “Obese” Among Low-Income Women

Samantha Ellis, BS<sup>1</sup>; Katherine Rosenblum, PhD<sup>2,3</sup>; Alison Miller, PhD<sup>2,4</sup>; Karen E. Peterson, DSc<sup>2,5</sup>; Julie C. Lumeng, MD<sup>1,2,5</sup>

## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To determine how low-income, US women understand the meanings of the terms “overweight” and “obese.”

**Methods:** Low-income women ( $n = 145$ ; 72% white, 12% black, and 8% Hispanic; 59% obese and 21% overweight) each participated in an individual semi-structured interview during which they were asked to explain what the terms “overweight” and “obese” mean to them. Responses were transcribed and the constant comparative method was used to identify themes.

**Results:** Three themes emerged: (1) The terms are offensive and describe people who are unmotivated and depressed and do not care about themselves; (2) obese is an extreme weight (eg, 500 lb and being immobile); (3) being overweight is a matter of opinion; if a woman is “comfortable in her own skin” and “feels healthy,” she is not overweight.

**Conclusions and Implications:** Health education focused on obesity should consider that vulnerable populations might consider the terms “overweight” and “obese” offensive and stigmatizing.

**Key Words:** obesity, overweight, communication, women, stigma (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2014;46:299–303.)

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## INTRODUCTION

As of 2010, 69% of US adults are overweight or obese and rates are higher among low-income women.<sup>1</sup> Prior work has found negative attributions and stigma associated with being overweight, with studies reporting that obese individuals are often viewed as “lazy, unmotivated, lacking in self-discipline, less competent, noncompliant, and sloppy.”<sup>2</sup> It is important to understand the meaning that these terms have, particularly among low-income women, for several reasons. First, many overweight or obese individuals do not self-identify as such,<sup>3,4</sup> believing that the terms “overweight” and “obese” do not apply to them, and therefore

public health messaging referring to these weight categories may not reach its intended audience. Second, these descriptors may elicit such strong negative feelings in certain groups that the use of the terms in obesity prevention or health promotion messaging is potentially detrimental to how the intended message will be interpreted. Thus, obesity prevention programming may be more effective if the messaging uses language more acceptable to the population. Finally, a better understanding of how individuals understand these terms may provide an agenda for future health education initiatives. The present study therefore used qualitative methods to better understand how

low-income women interpret the terms “overweight” and “obese.”

## METHODS

Participants ( $n = 145$ ) were part of a longitudinal study examining psychosocial and behavioral contributors to low-income children’s obesity risk. Participants in the original longitudinal study were invited through their child’s Head Start program, located in Southeastern Michigan, to participate in a study about children’s eating behaviors. Participants were observed longitudinally, and about 2 years later were invited to participate in this follow-up study, which was explained as aiming to “understand how mothers and caregivers feed their children.”

Exclusion criteria for the parent study were: the parent had a 4-year college degree or higher; the parent or child did not speak English; or the child was in foster care, had food allergies, or had significant medical problems or perinatal complications or gestational age  $< 35$  weeks. Each female primary caregiver participated in a semi-structured audiotaped individual interview with a trained interviewer focused on women’s beliefs about feeding their children. A semi-

<sup>1</sup>Department of Pediatrics, University of Michigan Medical School, Ann Arbor, MI

<sup>2</sup>Center for Human Growth and Development, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI

<sup>3</sup>Department of Psychiatry, University of Michigan Medical School, Ann Arbor, MI

<sup>4</sup>Department of Health Behavior and Health Education, University of Michigan School of Public Health, Ann Arbor, MI

<sup>5</sup>Department of Environmental Health Sciences, Human Nutrition Program, University of Michigan School of Public Health, Ann Arbor, MI

Address for correspondence: Julie C. Lumeng, MD, Center for Human Growth and Development, 300 North Ingalls St, 10th Fl, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-5406; Phone: (734) 647-1102; Fax: (734) 936-9288; E-mail: jlumeng@umich.edu

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structured individual interview rather than a focus group approach was used because prior work<sup>5</sup> found that the topics of child feeding and weight status often evoke strong feelings that may not emerge in a group setting. The institutional review board approved the study after full review. Written informed consent was provided and women were compensated for their time.

Interviews were completed by 7 research assistants. All research assistants had bachelor's degrees and were full-time research staff. Each research assistant participated in several hours of training in appropriate interview administration by a doctoral-level research psychologist experienced in the administration and interpretation of similar interviews for research purposes. Training included instruction on approaches to establishing rapport, decisions regarding whether and how to give verbal and nonverbal feedback to the participant during the interview, allowing for pauses to provide the participant time to elaborate on her response, and when and how to probe for additional detail. Audiotapes of previously completed interviews were reviewed with the research assistants to provide both positive and suboptimal examples of interview administration for discussion. After training, each research assistant conducted 1 interview; the research psychologist reviewed the audiotape of this interview and provided written and verbal feedback to the research assistant. Specifically, corrective feedback was provided if interview questions were not asked verbatim or if prompts, pauses, or feedback to the participant during the interview were not used effectively or appropriately. In addition, feedback was provided to the research assistant regarding approaches to establishing rapport, managing unelaborated responses, negotiating the interview when the participant repeatedly digressed far off topic, and sensitively responding when the participant shared a particularly emotional or personal detail. This process continued until each research assistant demonstrated acceptable and reliable interview administration skills, as assessed by the doctoral-level research psychologist. The research psychologist periodically reviewed audio

files of each research assistant's interview administration to ensure ongoing reliability of administration. Research assistants also performed peer review of audio files, and new examples of the challenges to appropriate interview administration, as described above, were discussed in regular staff meetings.

Interviews were conducted privately at a location of the participant's choice, which included her home or a room at a local community center. Interviewers followed a standardized interview guide developed by the authors; the guide could be referenced as needed, but research assistants were expected to be fluent in the interview. The interview guide was developed by 2 authors (both clinician-researchers in developmental psychology, developmental and behavioral pediatrics, and obesity) over a period of 8 years; over this time, the interview was administered to 133 women of diverse race and ethnicity and socioeconomic status (none of these women are included in the present analysis).<sup>5,6</sup> The interview guide was modified based on this initial work, before implementation with this cohort. The interview began with the research assistant explaining that "We would like to spend some time hearing from you about feeding your child(ren)." This brief describes responses to the 2 open-ended questions occurring near the middle of the interview, after a series of questions about mealtimes at home, child eating behaviors, and child feeding practices: "What does the word "overweight" mean to you?" and "What does the word "obese" mean to you?"

Participants reported their race and ethnicity, highest education level attained, and age, and were weighed and measured. Body mass index (BMI) was calculated and categorized as obese ( $BMI \geq 30$ ), overweight ( $25 \leq BMI < 30$ ), or normal weight ( $BMI < 25$ ).<sup>7</sup> A majority of the women were non-Hispanic white ( $n = 105$  [72%]), 18 were black (12%), 11 were Hispanic (8%), and the remainder were other races or multiracial (8%). Regarding education, 18% had less than a high school diploma, 33% had a high school diploma or equivalent only, and 49% had taken some college courses. Most of the women

(58.6%) were obese, 20.7% were overweight, and 20.7% were normal weight. Prevalence of overweight and obesity did not differ across racial or ethnic groups by chi-square analysis. Mean age was 31.6 years (SD, 7.8 years; range, 21.1–62.8 years). A total of 27% were married, 28% were in a committed relationship, 26% had never married, 17% were separated or divorced, and 2% were widowed. Of the 102 women in the sample who provided income data, 73% reported some household income from paid employment. The mean age of participants' children enrolled in the study was 5.9 years (SD, 0.6 years; range, 4.3–6.9 years).

Interviews were digitally audio recorded and transcribed verbatim with identifiers removed. All transcripts were reviewed for accuracy by a second transcriptionist. The portion of the interview that included the answers to questions regarding weight status was saved in a separate file, and readers reviewed only this portion of the interview. The transcript data were systematically analyzed using the constant comparative method.<sup>8</sup> Two independent readers who did not participate in data collection read the same 45 interviews. Readers remained blinded to the weight status as well as the race and ethnicity of participants, to avoid any possibility of biasing the identification or interpretation of themes. The readers annotated the interviews, generating themes and identifying supporting quotes. They collectively identified 21 themes. The 2 readers then met with a third reader and reviewed the identified themes. Collaborative discussion allowed evaluation of possible biases among readers as perceptions and interpretations of interviews were checked and alternative approaches to interpreting and grouping the data were considered. Many of the identified themes required further specification, or were thought to be more appropriately integrated into a single unified theme. Of the 21 themes initially identified, 4 ultimately were not included. Review of the remainder of the interviews confirmed the initial impression that these 4 themes represented deviant cases. Analysis of these deviant cases contributed to refinement of the themes. After the initial identification

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