



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Child Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp



Brief Report

Toddlers' bias to look at average versus obese figures relates to maternal anti-fat prejudice



Ted Ruffman^{a,*}, Kerry S. O'Brien^{b,*}, Mele Taumoepeau^a, Janet D. Latner^c,
John A. Hunter^a

^aDepartment of Psychology, University of Otago, Dunedin 9054, New Zealand

^bSchool of Social Sciences, Monash University, Caulfield East, Victoria 3145, Australia

^cDepartment of Psychology, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu, HI 96822, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 11 November 2015

Keywords:

Anti-fat attitudes
Obesity
Prejudice
Social learning
Infancy
Toddlers

ABSTRACT

Anti-fat prejudice (weight bias, obesity stigma) is strong, prevalent, and increasing in adults and is associated with negative outcomes for those with obesity. However, it is unknown how early in life this prejudice forms and the reasons for its development. We examined whether infants and toddlers might display an anti-fat bias and, if so, whether it was influenced by maternal anti-fat attitudes through a process of social learning. Mother–child dyads ($N = 70$) split into four age groups participated in a preferential looking paradigm whereby children were presented with 10 pairs of average and obese human figures in random order, and their viewing times (preferential looking) for the figures were measured. Mothers' anti-fat prejudice and education were measured along with mothers' and fathers' body mass index (BMI) and children's television viewing time. We found that older infants ($M = 11$ months) had a bias for looking at the obese figures, whereas older toddlers ($M = 32$ months) instead preferred looking at the average-sized figures. Furthermore, older toddlers' preferential looking was correlated significantly with maternal anti-fat attitudes. Parental BMI, education, and children's television viewing time were unrelated to preferential looking. Looking times might signal a precursor to explicit fat prejudice socialized via maternal anti-fat attitudes.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

* Corresponding authors.

E-mail addresses: tedr@psy.otago.ac.nz (T. Ruffman), kerry.o'brien@monash.edu (K.S. O'Brien).

Introduction

Bias against people perceived to be obese (i.e., anti-fat prejudice, weight bias) is common in most settings, including education, health, and employment (O'Brien, Hunter, & Banks, 2007). Anti-fat prejudice appears to be increasing (Latner & Stunkard, 2003) and is associated with social isolation, depression, psychiatric symptoms, low self-esteem, and poor body image (Puhl & Latner, 2007). There is a growing literature detailing the extent and consequences of anti-fat prejudice, yet little is known about the development of this prejudice (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 1999), in particular, when anti-fat prejudice arises and why.

Some research indicates that anti-fat prejudice is present during early childhood. By 5 to 10 years of age, children state that they would rather be friends with thin as opposed to overweight individuals and that thin females would be less desirable as friends if they are pictured in the vicinity of overweight females (Penny & Haddock, 2007). Even preschoolers ($M = 3.67$ years) assign more negative attributes to overweight than normal-weight dolls (Turnbull, Heaslip, & McLeod, 2000). Thus, anti-fat prejudice arises early in life, although it is unknown whether there are biases against overweight and obese figures in still younger children (e.g., infants/toddlers) and, if so, how they might arise.

One explanation of an anti-fat bias is that it is communicated through maternal or paternal attitudes via a process of social learning (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). To this end, there are attributions representing obesity as a moral failing (e.g., lazy, gluttonous) and stereotypes that portray people who are fat as unattractive, smelly, and unhygienic (O'Brien et al., 2013). Although there is some consistency in individuals' prejudice toward obese individuals (e.g., in China and America; Klaczynski, 2008), there are also differences suggesting that social learning occurs. For instance, in some Pacific countries, increased weight has traditionally been associated with wealth and, therefore, has been looked on more favorably (Brewis, Wutich, Falletta-Cowden, & Rodriguez-Soto, 2011). Consistent with social learning theory, a recent meta-analysis examined a wide range of parent-child prejudices, finding that children's attitudes closely resembled those of their parents (Degner & Dalege, 2013). More directly, two studies indicate that 4-year-olds' attitudes toward obese individuals are related to parents' attitudes (Holub, Tan, & Patel, 2011; Rich et al., 2008).

Recently, Heron-Delaney, Quinn, Lee, Slater, and Pascalis (2013) showed infants pairs of pictures displaying a toned muscular body versus an overweight body, finding that 3- and 6-month-olds did not have a bias but that 9-month-olds looked longer at overweight bodies. This finding could be interpreted either as evidence of increased attention to overweight individuals due to wariness or as a preference for overweight rather than slim bodies. What is needed to provide clarity when examining research on very young children is evidence linking their looking biases to caregivers' attitudes toward obesity. A relation between such attitudes and very young children's looking biases would more clearly provide evidence for socialization theory.

Our research builds on previous research by first examining whether looking biases away from overweight bodies are present in four age groups: young infants ($M = 7$ months), older infants ($M = 11$ months), young toddlers ($M = 29$ months), and older toddlers ($M = 32$ months). Second, we examined whether maternal attitudes are related to children's looking biases. Infants have relatively impoverished language ability (Dale & Fenson, 1996), social understanding (Ruffman, 2014), and experience in the world. Whether an anti-fat attitude was expressed verbally or nonverbally through gesture or facial expression, toddlers would be more likely to understand than infants. If anti-fat attitudes are socialized, a bias against viewing overweight bodies in toddlers should be related to maternal attitudes.

We also examined a range of potentially confounding variables that might influence children's looking biases, including (a) maternal and paternal body mass index (BMI), which Heron-Delaney and colleagues (2013) hypothesized might relate to children's viewing biases (for same-sized bodies as their parents), (b) maternal education because education is a prime indicator of socioeconomic status (SES) and higher SES is associated with less favorable attitudes toward obesity (Sobal & Stunkard, 1989), and (c) children's television viewing, a known correlate of some of children's attitudes such as aggression (Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003), attitudes toward food (Dixon, Scully, Wakefield, White, & Crawford, 2007), and weight bias (Latner, Rosewall, & Simmonds, 2007).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7274855>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7274855>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)