



# Applying the contact hypothesis to anti-fat attitudes: Contact with overweight people is related to how we interact with our bodies and those of others<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

This paper is the first to apply the contact hypothesis, a social psychological theory of prejudice reduction, to the field of weight bias. It aims to investigate whether contact with overweight people is associated with the extent to which people report weight bias, as well as vigilance around their own bodies. In 2013 we recruited 1176 American participants to complete surveys regarding prejudice toward overweight people, as well as a suite of measures capturing people's relationships with their own weight (fat talk, drive for thinness, and body-checking behavior). Positive contact with overweight people predicted decreased prejudice, regardless of whether participants were overweight ( $p < .001$ ) or not ( $p = .003$ ). However, negative contact was a stronger predictor of increased prejudice ( $p < .001$  for both samples). For non-overweight participants, any contact with overweight people (whether positive or negative) predicted increased body-checking behaviors (positive- $p = .002$ , negative- $p < .001$ ) and fat talk (positive- $p = .047$ , negative- $p < .001$ ), and negative contact predicted increased drive for thinness ( $p < .001$ ). However, for those who were overweight a different picture emerged. While negative contact predicted increased body-checking behaviors ( $p < .001$ ) and fat talk ( $p < .001$ ), positive contact was protective, predicting decreased drive for thinness ( $p = .001$ ) and body-checking behaviors ( $p < .001$ ). This paper demonstrates that the interactions we have with overweight people are inherently tied to both our attitudes towards them and our relationship with our own bodies.

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Negative attitudes towards overweight<sup>1</sup> people are pervasive and widespread (Latner and Stunkard, 2003). Being subject to discrimination because of one's body size is an overwhelmingly negative experience, leading to psychological distress, lower self-esteem and poor body image (Ashmore et al., 2008). As such, we must identify factors that reduce weight bias.

Prejudice reduction research presents positive interactions or contact between group members as an antidote to intergroup

hostility (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). However, researchers have never investigated whether having overweight friends reduces weight bias. Accordingly, we look at how both positive and negative contact with overweight people predicts anti-fat attitudes. We also examine how contact with overweight people is associated with our feelings about our own bodies, and how we monitor and talk about them. This paper is one of the first to apply theory and knowledge from prejudice reduction research that is well established in other domains (such as race, sexuality) to further the field of weight bias. We demonstrate that interactions with overweight people influence both our attitudes towards them, and our relationship with our own bodies.

## 1. Weight bias

Despite people getting fatter (Mokdad et al., 1999), negative attitudes against fat people are prevalent, widespread, and begin in

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<sup>1</sup> In the interest of brevity, the word 'overweight' is used to encompass both overweight and obese people.

early childhood (Latner and Stunkard, 2003). Furthermore, anti-fat attitudes are one of the last socially acceptable forms of prejudice, and fat people some of the last acceptable targets (Annis et al., 2004; Gumble and Carels, 2012). As a result, both implicit and explicit anti-fat attitudes are prevalent (O'Brien et al., 2007), and predictive of discrimination based on size (O'Brien et al., 2013).

The influence of weight bias is far-reaching. Overweight people get lower grades (MacCann and Roberts, 2013), and are less likely to be accepted into higher education (O'Brien et al., 2007; O'Brien et al., 2008; Puhl and Brownell, 2006) or to be employed (O'Brien et al., 2007; O'Brien et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 1993). Furthermore, they receive substandard mental and physical health care in comparison to 'normal'-weight individuals. Many doctors and health practitioners prefer not to treat fat patients, and spend less time with them, often dismissing or overlooking health problems unrelated to weight (O'Brien et al., 2007; O'Brien et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 1993). Weight bias also manifests in other settings, including the media, adoption services, and the legal system (Schvey et al., 2013).

## 2. Reducing weight bias

Given the prevalence of weight bias, a number of researchers have attempted to reduce anti-fat attitudes. A stable predictor of anti-fat attitudes is the belief that weight is controllable, and that excess weight is due to poor self-control or laziness (Robinson et al., 1993). Consequently, weight bias reduction interventions have focused predominantly on providing information about the uncontrollable biological and genetic factors that influence obesity, and the difficulties of losing weight and maintaining weight loss. In general, this approach has reduced anti-fat attitudes, especially if the person presenting the information was overweight (Crandall, 1994; Robinson et al., 1993; Diedrichs and Barlow, 2011; but see Teachman et al., 2003). Anti-fat attitudes have also been reduced by telling participants that others hold favorable beliefs about overweight people (Puhl et al., 2005). However, interventions focusing on evoking empathy towards overweight people have been largely unsuccessful in reducing negative attitudes towards them (Gapinski et al., 2006; Teachman et al., 2003).

The interventions reviewed above come predominantly from a public and clinical health psychology perspective. However, social psychologists have spent the past 50 years researching prejudice, and to date very few researchers have wed together the insights from clinical, health and social psychology. Accordingly, we suggest that the approaches identified as effective by social psychologists have been underutilized in the field of weight bias. From a social psychology perspective, and in light of strong existing evidence on prejudice reduction in other domains (e.g., race, sexual orientation), we suggest that interpersonal factors that influence our weight-based attitudes also need to be examined. Thus, we introduce the contact hypothesis and argue that contact with overweight people might be critical in influencing how we feel about them.

## 3. The contact hypothesis

The contact hypothesis, formalized by Gordon Allport (1954), proposes that face-to-face contact between opposing group members can reduce prejudice. Since the contact hypothesis was developed, many studies have demonstrated that the premise holds. Contact with outgroup members (that is, members of a group to which one does not belong) is typically linked to reduced prejudice towards the outgroup. Such effects hold cross-sectionally and experimentally, and across multiple intergroup contexts, such

as different races and sexualities (for a meta-analysis see Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006).

Recently, focus has shifted towards examining negative aspects of intergroup contact. Not all contact is positive, and it makes sense that negative contact might intensify rather than ameliorate prejudice. In addition, there is evidence that people are primed to attend more to negative than positive experiences. For example, people focus more on negative stereotypes than positive ones (Baumeister et al., 2001). Theorists have thus posited a positive-negative asymmetry such that negative contact should have a stronger and more consistent influence on increasing prejudice than positive contact should have on reducing it (Paolini et al., 2010). Evidence for this positive-negative asymmetry has been found across a range of inter-ethnic contexts (Barlow et al., 2012).

Irrespective of valence, a contact framework has never been applied to anti-fat attitudes. This presents an exciting opportunity to use existing social psychology knowledge and apply it to the weight bias field (for example, in interventions to reduce weight bias). Thus, in the present paper we examine whether contact with overweight people predicts how we feel about them. A traditional contact perspective would state that positive contact with overweight people would reduce anti-fat attitudes, and negative contact would increase them. However, we argue that various factors indicate important differences when looking at contact with a weight-based group compared to other domains.

## 4. The special case of the overweight

When applying the contact hypothesis to anti-fat attitudes, several considerations must be noted. First, both overweight and 'normal'-weight people display weight bias (Schwartz et al., 2006). As such, the relationship between contact and prejudice should be examined for both groups. Second, overweight people often do not accept that they are part of this group, and may believe that they can move out of it (if they lose weight; Johnson et al., 2008). Third, this is a group that others can join (if they gain weight), and the fear of joining can be a strong concern for both genders (potentially due to the discrimination that overweight people face; Herek and Capitano, 1996). In short, the permeability of the boundary between overweight and 'normal'-weight people presents a different psychological dynamic from other groups typically examined in the contact literature (e.g., race, sexual orientation). Critically, it is both possible to move into this group *and* difficult to control whether one does.

One consequence of this is that for 'normal'-weight people, any contact with overweight people might be aversive – a reminder of whom they fear becoming. Given the potentially negative consequences of contact outlined above, contact with overweight people may also have a less positive influence on prejudice than one would normally expect on the basis of the contact hypothesis. However, for those who are already overweight we suggest that contact should function as expected. People who are overweight already belong to the stigmatized group, and thus do not face the same anxieties about migrating into the group as do people with a low BMI. They do, however, face substantial prejudice as a consequence of their group membership. As such, research looking at race-relations in the United States might provide some clues as to what the relationship between contact with overweight people and associated outcome variables might be for those that are overweight themselves. Past research typically suggests that being embedded in, and feeling a part of, a minority group is protective. Specifically, multiple studies have found that Black Americans who are embraced by their group, and identify with them are happier and healthier (see Branscombe et al., 1999; Miller and MacIntosh, 1999). Here, we might expect something similar for those who

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