



Anti-fat prejudice among children: The “mere proximity” effect in 5–10 year olds ☆

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Abstract

Research has shown that average-weight individuals are derogated when viewed next to overweight background individuals, rather than next to average-weight background individuals (Hebl, M. R., & Mannix L. M. (2003). The weight of obesity in evaluating others: A mere proximity effect. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29, 28–38). The aim of the present investigation was to determine whether this *mere proximity* effect would be obtained among children, and to determine how participant gender, target character gender and size, and background character size affect this finding. Eighty-nine children between 5 and 10 years old indicated whether they would like to be friends with a target character, who was either male or female and average-weight or overweight. The target was presented with four other background characters of the same gender, all of whom were either average-weight or overweight. The results showed that overall, overweight targets were liked significantly less than average-weight targets, though this effect was moderated by target gender. Furthermore, participants liked average-weight female targets significantly less when they were presented with overweight background characters, and liked overweight female targets significantly less when they were presented with average-weight background characters. This was not the case for male targets. These findings support the mere proximity effect for female targets and demonstrate that this effect is present in children as young as five years of age. The implications are discussed with regards to obesity stigma.

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Obesity stigma has serious consequences for the stigmatized individual. Obese people are perceived as less attractive, popular, happy, intelligent, and as having less success in jobs and relationships (Hebl & Heatherton, 1998). Obese people are also perceived as being less tidy, more emotional, and even having “different personalities” (Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Harris, 1999). Furthermore, obese individuals are discriminated against by health care professionals, receiving shorter examinations and having a greater likelihood of being ascribed negative attributes and more illness (Hassel, Amici, Thurston, & Gorsuch, 2001; Hebl, Xu, & Mason, 2003).

Such a pervasive stigma has far reaching effects. Research has shown that when an initially non-stigmatized person has a relationship with a stigmatized individual they too can become the victim of stigmatization (Neuberg, Smith, Hoffman, & Russell, 1994). Neuberg et al. (1994) found that heterosexual males were consistently derogated when observed with a homosexual friend. This effect has also been found with obesity stigma. Gallagher, Tait, McCologan, Dovey, and Halford (2003) observed that students rated an average-weight male with an overweight female prom date more negatively than the same male with an average-weight female date. Similarly, Hebl and Mannix (2003) found that an average-weight male job applicant who sat next to an overweight female stranger was stigmatized as much as an applicant who was perceived as sitting next to his overweight girlfriend, thus suggesting that no relationship is necessary for stigmatization to occur. This

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mere proximity effect is an interesting and worrying phenomenon that needs to be explored in further detail. Toward that end, the present study investigated whether a mere proximity anti-fat prejudice effect would occur among children, and whether such an effect might vary as a function of target gender, participant gender, and age.

Anti-fat attitudes among children

Anti-fat attitudes in children have been reported in past research, with children displaying attitudes similar to those found in adults. For example Cramer and Steinwert (1998) found stigmatization in children as young as 3–5 years of age, who perceived overweight children as being both mean and an undesirable playmate. Such stigmatization is important, because even at this young age peer rejection has long lasting consequences (McDougall, Hymel, Vaillancourt, & Mercer, 2001). Given the close proximity in which children socialize and form friends, understanding the scope of a mere proximity effect among children is of great importance. Previous research suggests that an obese child will be the victim of stigmatization (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 1999) and less likely to be chosen as a playmate (Harper, Wacker, & Cobb, 1986). Furthermore, a potentially non-prejudiced child may be discouraged from playing with an obese child because of a potential association with stigmatization. This could cause an already isolated children to become even more disconnected from their peers. Therefore, determining whether the mere proximity effect for obesity occurs in children is necessary to help understand a child's social development.

Gender, children, and the mere proximity effect

Previous research has yet to investigate the influence of age and gender on the mere proximity effect. Both Gallagher et al. (2003) and Hebl and Mannix (2003) had adult participants rate a male target accompanied by a female partner/background character. However, research suggests that gender has an influence on how individuals are themselves perceived and how they perceive others (Furnham & Radley, 1989). Cossrow, Jeffery, and McGuire (2001) found that women reported experiencing weight stigmatization more often than men, suggesting that anti-fat attitudes are more likely to be directed at overweight females than males. As such, it is likely that the results of the Gallagher et al. (2003) and Hebl and Mannix (2003) studies might have been different had both the target and background character been of the same gender, or had the targets been female. Specifically, it is possible that the presence of an overweight female partner/stranger exaggerated the effect, because the increased importance of thinness for females leads overweight females to be stigmatized more than overweight males (e.g., Ananth, 1982; Crandall, 1995). Consistent with this proposal, in a study of 12–19 year olds, Toro, Castro, Garcia, Perez, and Cuesta (1989) found that females are exposed to a “culture of slenderness,” which causes a

greater emphasis to be placed on female thinness. In other research, Phillips and Hill (1998) found that overweight girls were significantly less likely than average-weight girls to be nominated as pretty by their peers, whereas Adams et al. (2000) found that 4th and 7th grade males reported being less concerned about weight and perceived less concern from family and peers regarding weight. This research suggests that people are more likely to notice and be concerned about girls' weight rather than boys.

Taken together, the existing research suggests that the mere proximity effect found by Hebl and Mannix (2003) should be obtained among children. The current study tested this hypothesis using a sample of children aged 5–10. As an extension of previous research, the current study also assessed whether evaluations of an overweight target are affected by the size of the background characters. Given the high emphasis placed on female thinness and greater stigmatization of overweight females, it was predicted that anti-fat prejudice would be particularly salient for female targets. Further, it was hypothesized that average-weight female targets would be liked less when presented with overweight background characters compared to average-weight background characters, and that overweight female targets would be liked less when presented with average-weight background characters. This mere proximity effect was not expected to be as salient when male targets were presented with overweight versus average-weight background characters.

Methods

Participants

Eighty-nine children from three junior schools in South Wales took part in this study. Participants were 47 females and 42 males, aged between 5 and 10 years. Letters were sent to the parents/guardians of all children aged 5–10. Participation was limited to those children whose parents returned the consent form to the school.

Materials

Twenty-four pairs of images were created for this study. Each image was a colored cartoon drawing of a child. Each individual image was placed on a separate card that was 10cm by 15cm, and each character was either male or female. For each character there was an average-weight version and an overweight version, both were identical in every other way except for their weight (see Fig. 1).

Design

The between-participant variables in the study were participant gender and age group (5–6; 7–8; 9–10); the within-participant factors were gender of the target and background character (both male or female), target size, and the size of the background characters. The different combina-

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