



Does parental capital influence the prevalence of child overweight and parental perceptions of child weight-level?

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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of child obesity has increased steadily in the recent decades. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of lifestyle connecting objective conditions with preferences, values and behaviour, this paper seeks to provide an extension to previous research, which has found child body formation to be correlated with parental socioeconomic background. The paper shows how parental level of capital, especially cultural capital, influences the prevalence of child overweight and parental perceptions of child weight-levels. Parents with higher levels of cultural capital are less likely to have overweight children and more likely to perceive weight-levels in accordance with the BMI categories. The results also demonstrate clear gender differences. Parents have a tendency to overestimate their daughters' weight-levels while underestimating the weight-levels of their sons compared to the BMI categories. The study is based on Danish survey data from 2007 and uses statistical estimation techniques.

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Introduction

The prevalence of child obesity has increased steadily in the recent decades (Pearson, Olsen, Hansen, & Sørensen, 2005; Wang & Beydoun, 2007). Child obesity has been shown to correlate with physical health problems (Lobstein, Baur, & Uauy, 2004) and obese children have been found more likely to become obese as adults than standard-weight children (Serdula et al., 1993). A reduction in the upward tendency to child obesity therefore seems crucial and more research within this field has been called for (Doolen, Alpert, & Miller, 2009). As a primary unit of socialisation, the family exert a vital influence on the child with respect to dietary intake and exercise behaviour (Fisher, Mirchell, Smiciklas-Wright, & Birch, 2002). Previous research has shown that child weight-level is correlated with parental socioeconomic characteristics (Kleiser, Rosario, Mensink, Prinz-Lagenohl, & Kurth, 2009; Wang, 2001). Research has further indicated that many parents of overweight children fail to recognise their children's weight problems and that this misperception is also correlated with socio economic characteristics (Doolen et al., 2009; Etelson, Brand, Patrick, & Shirali, 2003). The question is, however, why we observe these correlations? Roughly speaking, results suggest that an increase in the population's educational or income level would eliminate child

obesity. Yet, considering the simultaneous increase in educational levels, income levels and obesity in the Western World this does not seem to be the solution. Instead, it seems more plausible that behaviours, values and mindset connected to socioeconomic status affect child weight-levels and that these must be incorporated into research if we are to further the understanding of child obesity.

The aim of this paper is to employ the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's considerations of lifestyle and particularly his concepts of habitus, field and capital in a study of differentiated child weight-levels and parental perceptions of their children's weight-levels. I wish to supplement previous findings in four ways. Firstly, I study both reported child weight-levels and parental perceptions of child weight-levels acknowledging that perceptions of the body play a vital role in weight-related behaviour and outcome. Secondly, I hope to broaden the approach to children's weight-levels by contextualising it with Bourdieu's theories of the interplay of social conditions and preferences, values and behaviour while acknowledging that thoughts and actions connected to socioeconomic characteristics shape the outcomes not the characteristics in themselves. Drawing on Bourdieu's more extensive theoretical framework concerning lifestyle-differentiated weight-behaviours and preferences regarding food, nutrition, exercise and shape of the body I investigate the correlation between capital possession and child weight-levels and parental perceptions of child weight-levels. I empirically extract differing levels of cultural, economic, social and symbolic capital and simultaneously analyse the effect of all four types of capital. To my knowledge, so far no one has applied

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this theoretical framework to child obesity prevalence and parental perceptions of child weight-levels, although several researchers have advocated for the usefulness of Bourdieu's theories when studying health and lifestyles (Carpiano, 2005; Cockerham, Rütten, & Abel, 1997; Williams, 1995). Thirdly, using an elaborate empirical model I estimate weight-level cut-off points for perceived weight-levels on the BMI scale, which allows me to compare actual and perceived weight-levels according to BMI. Fourthly, I apply a gender-differentiated approach to the analysis. Based on Bourdieu's theories, I expect preferences, behaviours and body images to vary according to gender with women being more conscious of and concerned with weight. The gendered approach is implemented with respect to both children and parents and will hopefully add new insight into a strand of studies that rarely incorporate such gender differentials (Doolen et al., 2009).

With the increasing research in overweight and obesity a growing literature criticize the trend towards embedding obesity research within an epidemiological tradition that links obesity and health outcomes uncritically and overlooks the ethical implications and the impact on individual lives and well-being of this approach (Monaghan, 2008; Rich & Evans, 2005). However, even if poorer health should not be linked to child weight-level, studies of the way individuals relate to their bodies are still important. The aim of this study is therefore not only to investigate differentiated weight-levels but also to look at the formation of differentiated body images developed within a family context and how parental perceptions might influence body perceptions and satisfactions – especially in a gendered context. Furthermore, the application of Bourdieu's lifestyle-perspective hints at a link between class position and behaviours concerning diet and physical activity possibly resulting in differentiated weight-levels. However, these are behaviours that would influence health irrespective of the resulting weight-level.

Theoretical background

The notion of *habitus* is central to Bourdieu's theoretical work. *Habitus* is defined as “the durable and transposable systems of schemata of perception, appreciation, and action that result from the institution of the social in the body” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:126). The conditions of existence structure the habitus and it is the sediment of the agents' past and present experiences and form the practices and perceptions of the agents. Individual behaviour, values and thoughts are organised and shaped through the habitus (Lee & Macdonald, 2009). In this way habitus is a ‘structured structure’ disposing the agent to continue with specific forms of practice, but it is also a ‘structuring structure’ that reproduces and generates practices (Crossley, 2001). With the concept of habitus Bourdieu seeks to transcend the structure-agency dichotomy to allow for the analytical integrity of both the agent and the structure while stressing their indispensable relation (Maton, 2008). The social world consists of different *fields*; distinct social spaces such as the political field or the field of sports that consist of interrelated and differentiated positions all battling for power and the dominant position. Power, labelled *capital* by Bourdieu, can take three basic forms. Economic capital equating traditional economic assets, cultural capital equating competence and knowledge of the conceptual and normative codes of a specific culture and social capital equating social resources linked to a social network (Bourdieu, 1986). Agents holding certain levels or configurations of the legitimised forms of capital within the specific field gain the most power (Lee & Macdonald, 2009). When a given form of capital or a resource is considered particularly powerful within a field it is denoted symbolic. Thus, power within a field interconnects with the individuals' participation in that field, and individuals with

the highest amount of legitimised capital hold the power to define ‘the rules of the game’. Concepts such as ‘good and bad taste’ and ‘aesthetics’ are defined by those in power, and taste serves as a way for those in power to distinguish themselves from other classes with less power and even more so from those with less power within the same class belonging to a different class fraction (Bourdieu, 1984). Taste can thereby be a way to categorize one's position in society, while the habitus ensures that preferences and tastes are aligned with one's conditions of existence.

Within the field of consumption, the alignment between objective conditions and tastes suggests that individuals with different levels and distributions of capital have a tendency to value different types of food (Bourdieu, 1984:183). Individuals with a general low level of capital are often more prone to traditional, heavier and cheaper types of food. Likewise, individuals with an abundance of economic capital have a partiality for traditional types of food, but they also value luxury items and expensive dishes, whereas individuals with a high level of cultural capital tend to value healthier, lighter and exotic foods (Bourdieu, 1984:183ff). Furthermore, the idea of the body and the importance of strength, health and beauty tend to vary according to social position. A pattern seems to evolve where individuals with a low level of capital emphasise strength and a natural body more, while individuals with a higher level of capital strive towards a healthy and more aesthetically pleasing body (Bourdieu, 1984:190ff). Bodies can therefore be seen as socially formed and the look of the body and the way people treat and relate to their body “*reveal[s] the deepest disposition of the habitus*” (Bourdieu, 1984:190). These suppositions regarding tastes, values and body formations are supported by research that apply Bourdieu's theories on subjects such as consumption patterns (Kraaykamp, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003) and sport activities (Wilson, 2002).

The family acts as one of the most important sites of accumulation and transmission of capital, and it is central to the formation of the habitus according to Bourdieu (1996). Thus, it is my supposition that lifestyles regarding body formation, physical activity and food tastes are transmitted from parents to children who will reproduce their parents' behaviour. Furthermore, I anticipate that parents will locate body perceptions within their own habitus. Formation of the child body is therefore expected to be interrelated with parental lifestyle, habitus and capital possession.

The role of gender

In his book *Masculine Domination* (2001), Bourdieu addresses the role of gender. He argues that besides biological differences in the male and female body, socially constructed differences exist between the genders particularly regarding the social division of labour (Bourdieu, 2001:11). Connected to the subject of this paper, Bourdieu argues that the bodily hexis, i.e. the physique of the body and the way it is carried and perceived, differs in men and women. To a much higher degree than men, women have a ‘body-for-others’, which is subject to judgment and objectification and expected to be feminine or have certain aesthetics (Bourdieu, 1978:839). These gender divisions reveal themselves in different ways. According to Bourdieu, people across classes tend to differentiate between masculine and feminine foods such as meats and salads, and masculinity tends to be consolidated by the consumption of generous portions of food contrary to the smaller feminine portion (Bourdieu, 1984:192). This theoretical perspective is supported by research showing parents are more likely to identify girls as overweight (Goodman, Hinden, & Khandelwai, 2000) and to encourage girls to lose weight (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001). If societal expectations of the male and female body along with self-perceptions of ideal weight and body shape do vary according

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