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Variation in Biases about Obesity and People with Obesity in Canada, the U.S., Mexico, and Brazil

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Abstract:

Introduction: Weight bias (WB) is an impediment to progress toward adoption of evidence-based strategies to address obesity. Key elements of WB include blame directed at people with obesity (PwO), assumptions of laziness or poor discipline, and social rejection. The present research measured beliefs about the causes of obesity, and beliefs and attitudes about PwO in English and French-speaking Canada (CAen, CAfr), US, Mexico (MX), and Brazil (BR).

Methods: Random samples totaling 47,282 adults completed anonymous, voluntary online surveys between Oct 2016 and Dec 2017. Microsurveys required only one response per participant to reduce fatigue with multiple questions. Likert scales (5 points) measured agreement with 4 narratives regarding causes of obesity, as well as perceptions of blame, social acceptance, laziness, and self-discipline of PwO.

Results: Agreement that obesity results from addictive junk food was high in all five populations, highest in BR (mean agreement 3.8±0.1), MX (3.7±0.1) and CAfr (3.7±0.1). Respondents in CA, US, and MX agreed that irresponsibility of individuals is a cause of obesity, while BR respondents disagreed. Belief that PwO should be blamed was highest in MX (3.4±0.1), lowest in BR (3.0±0.1). CAfr respondents agreed more than CAen with addictive junk food causing obesity and with social acceptance for PwO.

Conclusion: Public beliefs associated with WB vary among these five populations. Beliefs that addictive junk food plays a causal role in obesity is widespread and stronger in Brazil, CAfr, and MX. Tracking these patterns may help for developing and evaluating future interventions to reduce WB.

Keywords: Stigma, Weight Bias, Regional Differences