Patterns of Public Opinions about Obesity and People with Obesity in Different Countries

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• Professional fees
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• Personal biases that favor:
  – Evidence-based interventions, both prevention and treatment
  – Respect for people living with obesity
  – Critical thinking about all evidence
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Views of obesity and people living with it

Background
Competing Narratives Affect Ideas about Obesity Interventions

• Moral failure
  “A disgusting failure of personal responsibility”
• Addiction
  “Hooked on junk food & sugary drinks”
• Toxic environment
  “Too much unhealthy food, exercise impossible”
• Medical
  “Blaming, not helping people with this disease”

Source: Thibodeau et al, 2015
Pervasive Bias Hampers
Clinical Care and Obesity-Related Policy

• Blaming people living with obesity
• Counterproductive tension between prevention and clinical care
• Dysfunctional medical dialogue

“Our findings add to a growing body of literature that challenges a number of widely held assumptions about obesity within a health care system that is currently unsupportive of individuals living with obesity.”
– Kirk et al
Qual Health Res, 2014
Key Elements of Bias Against People with Obesity

- Blame directed at people with obesity
- Assumptions of
  - Laziness
  - Poor discipline
- Social rejection
Ongoing Study of Biases About Obesity and People Living with It

• Measuring public attitudes in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Sweden, UK, U.S.

• Assess agreement with different narratives for obesity

• Assess explicit beliefs about people with obesity

• Look for potential differences among the countries surveyed

• Monitor Trends
Framing Obesity as a Health Issue

Methods
Web and Smartphone Samples Obtained via Google Consumer Surveys

Sample Size

- 90,573 Total
Each Respondent
Answers Only 1 of 18 Questions

• Microsurveys minimize fatigue
• 5-point Likert scales
  “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”
• 4 narratives about obesity causes
• Blame, social acceptance, laziness, and self-discipline of people with obesity
  – Each question asked in both positive & negative form
• Minimum 500 respondents for each question in each country/language
Framing Obesity as a Health Issue

Results
People Across the World Seem to Favor “Addiction” as an Explanation for Obesity
Belief in the “Addiction” Explanation Was Especially Strong in Brazil, CA-Fr, and Italy

Note: Odds ratios calculated from cumulative logit models
Only UK and U.S. Respondents Believed in Irresponsibility as Much as Other Explanations

Note: Odds ratios calculated from cumulative logit models
Across All Measures, UK Respondents Expressed Harsh Bias, While CA-Fr Expressed Less

Note: Odds ratios calculated from cumulative logit models
Conclusions

• Public beliefs related to WB differ among these 9 populations

• Belief that addictive junk food causes obesity is strong

• That belief is especially strong in Brazil, Italy, and French Canada

• We found the harshest beliefs in the UK, less harsh beliefs in CA-Fr
More Information

- [www.conscienhealth.org/news](http://www.conscienhealth.org/news)
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Appendix
Competing Obesity Narratives

• Irresponsibility
  "Obesity is such a big problem because too many people don’t take personal responsibility for eating right and exercising. It’s disgusting."

• Addiction
  "Obesity is such a big problem because too many people get hooked on junk food and sugary drinks. They’ve become addicted and can’t help themselves."

• Environment
  "Obesity is such a big problem because the food industry sells so much unhealthy food while modern lifestyles make adequate exercise impossible."

• Disease
  "Obesity is such a big problem because too many people get blamed for this disease instead of getting the medical help they need."

Adapted from Thibodeau et al. 2015.09