A Comparative Analysis of Explicit Weight Bias in the UK and Eight Other Countries

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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

- Italy
  - 3% Strongly Disagree
  - 6% Disagree
  - 21% Neutral
  - 35% Agree
  - 35% Strongly Agree

- Sweden
  - 3% Strongly Disagree
  - 8% Disagree
  - 17% Neutral
  - 48% Agree
  - 24% Strongly Agree

- Canada-Fr
  - 3% Strongly Disagree
  - 9% Disagree
  - 26% Neutral
  - 37% Agree
  - 25% Strongly Agree

- Brazil
  - 11% Strongly Disagree
  - 7% Disagree
  - 18% Neutral
  - 19% Agree
  - 44% Strongly Agree

- Mexico
  - 12% Strongly Disagree
  - 9% Disagree
  - 16% Neutral
  - 20% Agree
  - 42% Strongly Agree

- Canada-En
  - 12% Strongly Disagree
  - 11% Disagree
  - 27% Neutral
  - 42% Agree
  - 26% Strongly Agree

- Australia
  - 8% Strongly Disagree
  - 13% Disagree
  - 27% Neutral
  - 27% Agree
  - 25% Strongly Agree

- UK
  - 11% Strongly Disagree
  - 15% Disagree
  - 27% Neutral
  - 22% Agree
  - 25% Strongly Agree

- Germany
  - 17% Strongly Disagree
  - 14% Disagree
  - 26% Neutral
  - 22% Agree
  - 21% Strongly Agree

- US
  - 16% Strongly Disagree
  - 14% Disagree
  - 31% Neutral
  - 19% Agree
  - 20% Strongly Agree
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

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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