Shifting Public Perceptions in Canada About the Nature of Obesity

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Disclosures

• Professional fees
  – Novo Nordisk
  – Nutrisystem

• Personal biases that favor:
  – Evidence-based interventions, both prevention and treatment
  – Respect for people living with obesity
  – Critical thinking about all evidence
Presentation Objectives

• Discuss the importance of public perceptions and bias about obesity

• Review how these perceptions may be changing in Canada

Source: OAC Image Gallery
Two Kinds of Bias Corrupt Our Response to Obesity

- **Intellectual bias** favoring personal convictions
- **Weight bias** directed at people with obesity
Obesity: Long Viewed as a Personal Failure

“Which phrase comes closest to describing the type of problem that you think obesity is?” (Feb 2013)

- Bad personal choices was the dominant explanation in 2013
- Data from ongoing tracking
- Respondents asked to pick one

- Personal Problem, Bad Choices 44%
- Medical 18%
- Community, Bad Food, Inactivity 24%
- Something Else 24%

Source: ConscienHealth research 2013.02
Beliefs About Obesity Vary Over Time and Between Cultures

“Which phrase comes closest to describing the type of problem that you think obesity is?” (Sep-Nov 2014)

**Canada**

- Community problem of bad food & inactivity: 38.7% (+2.4 / -2.3)
- Personal problem of bad choices: 31.7% (+2.4 / -2.3)
- Medical problem: 15.7% (+2.0 / -1.8)
- A totally different type of problem: 13.9% (+1.8 / -1.6)

**United States**

- Community problem of bad food & inactivity: 29.8% (+2.0 / -2.0)
- Personal problem of bad choices: 37.0% (+2.1 / -2.1)
- Medical problem: 18.1% (+1.7 / -1.6)
- A totally different type of problem: 15.1% (+1.6 / -1.5)

Weighted Sample: n = 2,138

Addressing Obesity as a Chronic Disease

- AMA resolved that obesity is a complex chronic disease in 2013
- CMA resolved similarly in 2015, calling for enhanced:
  - Research
  - Treatment
  - Prevention

Photo: OAC Image Gallery
Competing Narratives Affect Public Perceptions About Obesity

- 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
Web and Smartphone Samples Obtained via Google Consumer Surveys

Objective
• Measure shifts in beliefs about obesity

Sample Size
• Total ~20,000 Canadian adults
• Presented here: 5,025
• English & French speaking
• Fielded in Q4 2016 & 2017
Fewer English-Speaking Canadians See Obesity as a Problem of Irresponsibility

1. How strongly do you personally agree or disagree with the following statement?

**2016**

- Strongly Disagree: 15.2%
- Disagree: 23.6%
- Neutral: 22.0%
- Agree: 19.6%
- Strongly Agree: 15.5%

**Total Agree:** 42%

1. How strongly do you personally agree or disagree with the following statement?

**2017**

- Strongly Disagree: 18.2%
- Disagree: 20.1%
- Neutral: 28.1%
- Agree: 15.0%
- Strongly Agree: 18.7%

**Total Agree:** 34%
More French-Speaking Canadians See Obesity as a Problem of Irresponsibility

1. À quel point êtes-vous personnellement en accord ou en désaccord avec l’énoncé suivant?

- 2016
  
  1. Tout à fait en désaccord: 7.5%
  2. En désaccord: 17.4%
  3. Ne convaincu ni pour ni contre: 30.8%
  4. En accord: 25.6%
  5. Tout à fait en accord: 18.8%

- 2017
  
  1. Tout à fait en désaccord: 12.8%
  2. En désaccord: 11.8%
  3. Ne convaincu ni pour ni contre: 20.4%
  4. En accord: 39.8%
  5. Tout à fait en accord: 15.1%

44% Agree
55% Agree
Little Change in Views of Obesity as an Addiction Problem Among English-Speaking Canadians

1. How strongly do you personally agree or disagree with the following statement?

   **2016**

   - Strongly Disagree: 378 respondents
   - Strongly Agree: 50% Agree

2. How strongly do you personally agree or disagree with the following statement?

   **2017**

   - Strongly Disagree: 386 respondents
   - Strongly Agree: 47% Agree
Similar Views of Obesity as an Addiction Problem Among French-Speaking Canadians

1. À quel point êtes-vous personnellement en accord ou en désaccord avec l’énoncé suivant?

230 respondents

L’obésité est un énorme problème parce que trop de gens sont devenus à croc à la malfouffe et aux boissons sucrées. Ils sont devenus dépendants et ne peuvent plus s’en passer.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tout à fait en désaccord</th>
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<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>32%</td>
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58% Agree

1. À quel point êtes-vous personnellement en accord ou en désaccord avec l’énoncé suivant?

263 respondents

L’obésité est un énorme problème parce que trop de gens sont devenus à croc à la malfouffe et aux boissons sucrées. Ils sont devenus dépendants et ne peuvent plus s’en passer.

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<td>2017</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
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50% Agree
Stronger Agreement Obesity Is an Environment Problem Among English-Speaking Canadians

**2016**

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<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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- 11.4% Strongly Disagree
- 14.1% Disagree
- 32.0% Neither Agree nor Disagree
- 25.2% Agree
- 17.3% Strongly Agree

**43% Agree**

**2017**

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<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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- 16.0% Strongly Disagree
- 12.8% Disagree
- 26.4% Neither Agree nor Disagree
- 17.2% Agree
- 27.6% Strongly Agree

**45% Agree**
Trending to Less Agreement Among French Canadians About the Obesogenic Environment

**2016**

1. À quel point êtes-vous personnellement en accord ou en désaccord avec l’énoncé suivant?

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<th>Scale</th>
<th>2016 Percentage</th>
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<td>43.3%</td>
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**Total Agree: 61%**

**2017**

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**Total Agree: 46%**
One Third of English-Speaking Canadians Agree Obesity Is a Medical Problem

1. How strongly do you personally agree or disagree with the following statement?

372 respondents

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

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2016

39% Agree

1. How strongly do you personally agree or disagree with the following statement?

374 respondents

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

<table>
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2017

33% Agree
More French Canadians Agree Obesity Is a Medical Problem

2016: 40% Agree

2017: 54% Agree
Public Understanding of Obesity Continues to Evolve

- Significant differences, French vs English-speaking Canadians
  - French view: More of a medical problem
  - English view: Less irresponsibility, More environmental factors
Implications

• Big gaps remain in public understanding of obesity
• Note that explicit attitudes can hide implicit bias
• Continued tracking will be valuable

Source: Pawel Loj / flickr