The Growing Gap Between Explicit and Implicit Bias

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April 28, 2019
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

• Describe the growing gap between explicit and implicit bias

• Discuss ways it blocks our progress

Source: Pawel Loj / flickr
Why Is It That Obesity Trends Have Not Turned Around?

Figure 5. Trends in obesity prevalence among adults aged 20 and over (age adjusted) and youth aged 2–19 years: United States, 1999–2000 through 2015–2016


NOTES: All estimates for adults are age adjusted by the direct method to the 2000 U.S. census population using the age groups 20–39, 40–59, and 60 and over. Access data table for Figure 5 at: https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db208_table.pdf#5.

After Three Decades of Hard Work, Why Does Obesity Keep Growing?

Bottom Line: Bias Is the Biggest Reason
Bias is an inclination or outlook to present or hold a **partial perspective**, often accompanied by a refusal to consider the possible merits of **alternative points of view**. Biases are learned implicitly within cultural contexts. People may develop biases toward or **against** an **individual**, an ethnic **group**, a nation, a religion, a social class, a political party, theoretical **paradigms** and **ideologies** within academic domains, or a species.

– Adapted from
*Psychology: Contemporary Perspectives*
Paul Okami
Two Kinds of Bias Corrupt Our Response to Obesity

• Intellectual bias favoring personal convictions

• Weight bias directed at people with obesity

God Judging Adam, Etching by William Blake / WikiArt
People Typically View Obesity as the Result of Poor Choices

- Environment: 10%
- Choices: 20%
- Genes: 70%
Long Viewed as a Matter of Choice

“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
The Truth Is That

Obesity Is a Highly Heritable Chronic Disease

• Heredity plays a dominant role in obesity risk
• But environmental factors serve to activate it
• Then, people can choose what to do about it

Personal Choices 10%

Environmental Triggers 20%

Genetic Risk 70%

Source: Musani, Erickson, and Allison, 2008, AJCN
A Perfect Storm of Environmental Triggers

- Simplistic explanations are invariably wrong
- The more accurate view is a perfect storm of multiple factors

Weight Bias Flows from Common Assumptions About People with Obesity

Untitled, photograph by Boohoomian / flickr

Photograph courtesy of the UCONN Rudd Center
Assumptions Can Be Wildly Misleading
Demeaning Stereotypes About People with Obesity

- Lazy
- Stupid
- Undisciplined
- Sloppy
- Awkward
- Losers
- Dishonest
- Won’t follow directions
- Uniformly unhealthy
- Ignorant about nutrition
- Lives spent gorging on junk food

In the Kitchen, photograph © Obesity Action Coalition / OAC Image Gallery
Living with Discrimination Makes People Sicker

Pathways from stress to obesity

Source: Tomiyama, 2019, *Ann Rev Psych*
Bias Gets in the Way of Progress

• **Stigma leads to denial and inaction**
  – Blame directed at people with obesity
  – Assumptions of
    • Laziness
    • Poor discipline
  – Social rejection

• **People seek less care, get poor care, so health suffers**

• **Leads to ineffective policies**
Project Implicit

- 4.4 million tests
- Implicit and explicit attitudes
- Internet population
- 13 years
- Sexual orientation, race, skin tone, age, disability, and body weight

Source: Charlesworth and Banaji, 2018, Patterns of Implicit and Explicit Attitudes, Long-Term Change and Stability From 2007 to 2016
Explicit Weight Bias Is Fading

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Explicit Bias Trend 2007-2016</th>
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<td>Weight</td>
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Source: Charlesworth and Banaji, 2018, Patterns of Implicit and Explicit Attitudes, Long-Term Change and Stability From 2007 to 2016
Weight Bias Concerns Have Moved into Popular Culture, Labeled as Fat Shaming

• Multiple social movements
  – Body positivity
  – Feminism
  – Fat acceptance
  – Obesity activism

• Converged to make fat shaming unacceptable

Source: Google Trends data, 2017.07
Unfortunately, Implicit Bias Is Growing

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Source: Charlesworth and Banaji, 2018, Patterns of Implicit and Explicit Attitudes, Long-Term Change and Stability From 2007 to 2016
How Bias Harms People and Blocks Progress Against Obesity

Policy Implications of Bias About Obesity
Isn’t Obesity Just the Result of Eating More Calories Than You Burn?
Isn’t Obesity Just the Result of Eating More Calories Than You Burn?

NOT EXACTLY!
Rocket Science May Be Complicated
But Obesity Is Far More Complex
Obesity Grows from Complex, Adaptive Systems

Yet People Are Still Thinking
Severe Obesity Is a Simple Matter of Bad Habits

What do you believe is the primary cause of severe obesity when it occurs in young children?

- Poor diet and exercise habits: 55.5%
- Poor parenting: 18.8%
- Excessive marketing of junk food: 16.1%
- Genetics and physiology: 9.7%

722 respondents

Source: Google Surveys research by ConscienHealth and OAC, UK Respondents
And They Mistakenly Think Self-Help Can Cure It

**Obesity Treatments - U.K.**

1. Which of the following treatments for obesity is most effective?

766 respondents

- Self-directed diet and exercise: 59.5%
- Intensive lifestyle programs: 22.0%
- Bariatric surgery: 10.2%
- Obesity medications: 8.4%

**Obesity Treatments - U.S.**

1. Which of the following treatments for obesity is most effective?

776 respondents

- Self-directed diet and exercise: 52.5%
- Intensive lifestyle programs: 26.1%
- Bariatric surgery: 15.9%
- Obesity medications: 5.5%

Source: Google Surveys research by ConscienHealth and OAC
Movement Toward Progress Against Obesity
In 2013 AMA Declared Obesity Is a Complex, Chronic Disease

Milestones in Regarding Obesity as a Disease

- 1977: NIH Guidelines
- 1998: IRS Deductibility
- 2002: Social Security
- 2004: CMS Surgery Coverage
- 2006: Obesity Society White Paper
- 2008: AACE Position
- 2012: AMA: "Obesity is a disease"
- 2013: AMA: "Obesity is a disease"

Source: Kyle, Dhurandhar, and Allison, Endocrinol Metab Clin North Am, 2016.09
Explicit Public Views Are Slowly Shifting

- Fewer people think of obesity as a problem of bad personal choices
- People are shifting toward more diverse views of obesity

“Obesity is a personal problem of bad choices”

Source: ConscienHealth/OAC weight bias tracking research, 2017.05
Obesity Science
Is Bringing Better Insights and Solutions

- Hypothalamus controls fat mass and blood sugar
- More therapies to manage obesity
- Bariatric surgery extends life and puts diabetes in remission
Better progress will require:

- **Objectivity** to replace bias
- **Curiosity** about obesity and the people it affects
- **Care** for these people
More Information

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For these slides: